FICTION

The Lone Journey Together

Imaginative stories of beauty & warm humor

The Lone Journey Together

Imaginative Stories

Chaotic Terrain Press

MICKEY HUNT

An enormous *Liriodendron tulipifera* tree in Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest in western North Carolina, April 2023

The Lone Journey Together

Imaginative stories of beauty and warm humor

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Cover photo by Mickey Hunt, taken from the deck
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For the stranger

Matthew 25:38

Homesick

Thunder rumbled again from the southwest.

The broad, two-story house with its warm porch light might welcome him. But if a runaway had knocked on *his* front door long after midnight, his dad would greet the unlucky boy with a shotgun. So, Raiden turned around. Better to be harmless. Better for a gun to be pointed at his back.

The door opened behind him, and Raiden expected at least a suspicion-laden question. Instead he heard a sigh. A plump, grey-haired woman in a loose, white nightgown stood there, her face turned down to the side.

"Hello ma'am. May I stay in your barn tonight? Me and my horse, Jasper. He's tied to your paddock back there."

She unfolded glasses and slid them over her nose, but she still avoided eye contact. Silence stretched on long enough that Raiden thought he should leave, so when she asked, "What's your name?" he jumped a little.

He told her. She gave no sign, but backed out of the way. He didn't know what else to do but step inside. The front room glowed golden from one table lamp and smelled of rose water. It was tidy and clean, but stacked full of knickknack curiosities like a Cracker Barrel store.

A rough voice at the top of the staircase said, "Who is it?"

"Raiden Hancock," she said weakly, as if she had lost hope of being heard.

The man leaned on the handrail as he crept down the stairs. He straightened at the bottom, flicked on an overhead light, and looked Raiden over. "What's the problem?"

"I just need—" Raiden began, but the woman broke in.

"He asked if he could stay the night in an empty bedroom," she said. "It's going to rain. Can he keep his horse in a stall?"

Raiden wondered if she told a lie on purpose.

The man wiped his hand over his whole face, top to

bottom. “How old are you? Sixteen, seventeen?”

“I’m fifteen.”

“Why are you out like this?”

Raiden wouldn’t answer.

“Listen, I’m calling the sheriff. Your parents will worry. Where you from?”

“I ran away from home.”

“Why?” the woman asked.

The man glared at her. “Does it matter? Sometimes your kindness is annoying.”

“The why is, my dad planned to ship me to military school because I wouldn’t help slaughter the pigs. He already bought me a bus ticket.”

“I see,” the man said, not committing himself either way.

The woman took the man’s hand, raised it to her lips, and gave it a soft kiss.

He had not resisted any, but stared in sudden shock. “Come with me, please,” he said and gestured to a side room, a sitting room. She went in, and the man started after her, but came back. “My name’s Harold. And she’s my wife, Norma. She’s a nice lady, but… she has problems. I hope you understand. Want something to drink? A soda? Glass of milk?”

Raiden shook his head no.

“Okay.” He pointed to where Raiden was standing. “Don’t go anywhere.” He slid the door closed.

Harold did the talking. Maybe he did all the talking. All Raiden heard was his voice and periods of silence.

He wandered around the front room. A vase of pink and yellow roses on the mantlepiece reflected itself in the wide mirror. Photographs in gilt frames covered the walls and the upright piano, many of the pictures containing a young Harold and a blonde, curvy woman wearing tight dresses, like an old-fashioned movie star. Both of them were smiling so hard it must hurt. Her sad eyes reminded him of his own mother’s, and he had to shake off missing her already. The photos of horses grabbed his attention, tall, fast horses with small men

perched on top wearing caps and costumes.

The man droned on and Raiden put his ear to the door.

"We don't know anything about him. He can't stay in the house with us asleep. I won't sleep at all. Your mom's jewelry is in that bedroom. He could steal it, slip out, and we'd never see him again." There was another short spell of silence and then the man said, "How could I forget the miscarriages? They weren't anyone's fault. Not yours, not mine."

Raiden leaned away from the door and heard a sound he had been anticipating: his horse Jasper yelling. Raiden went outside and called to him and then walked to the fence. He stroked the horse's shoulder. Jasper was thirsty and hungry. A tall horse on the inside of the paddock startled him as it stumbled close by in the dim darkness.

The woman came out, leaving the door wide open, and shuffled up to Raiden. "My husband said you could sleep in an extra bedroom, and I'll show you where things are in the barn. But we have to phone your parents in the morning." She avoided looking at him as before, but she'd been crying.

Raiden frowned. "Did he really say I could sleep inside the house? I'd rather stay in the barn with Jasper, if you'll loan me a sleeping bag."

She glanced straight at him for the first time and flinched. It lasted only a second, but Raiden knew the look. It was the same his mother had given him when he decided to run away. He hadn't said a word, and yet his mother knew.

In a mournful dove's voice, Norma said, "If your parents agree, you can live here and work on our property. You can go to the school. We don't keep pigs." It seemed like she had more to say; instead, she rocked back and forth, her eyes glazed.

Raiden peered toward the house. Harold was standing in the open doorway, watching them. A strong breeze began thrashing the trees and the first raindrops of the storm dripped down.

She stopped rocking and said, "I don't want you to leave."

END

There are two more stories about Harold, Norma, and Raiden later on in this book, but don't skip ahead because the next one is pretty fun! **–MH**

Miss Thurman's Intervention

A horde of blatting, deafening Harley motorcycles rolled by Whatley's Farm Supply, halting all conversation, all thought.

Barry Sullivan shook his lanky blonde hair and clucked the tip of his tongue. "Miss Thurman, I'm not working for you anymore on my day off," he said to the woman beside him and closed the hatch of her Subaru.

"Here, take this." Miss Thurman held out a folded $10 bill.

"Now, you know I'm not allowed tips."

"You're a young man and you need money for your future, for your braces when you get them. You *should* go to college." She paused a moment and said, "I couldn't possibly lift those chicken feed bags when I get home. My figure has turned into a dumpling."

Barry pursed his lips over his jutting front teeth. "I've saved money for braces. This is a good job—Whatley's pays for health insurance, too. Did you hear me? I won't do your yard work unless we clean up your house. You have a problem."

Miss T's lower lip drooped like she might cry.

"You're not getting younger, Miss Thurman, and you need your house in order. You want to have company, some visitors once in a while."

"Are you going to load my Rose of Sharons?"

The plants in two-gallon liners waited on the wagon that Miss T. had dragged across the parking lot. Barry peered into the back seat of her car and saw stuff piled up to the windows. The front passenger side was the same. "No room. Like your house."

Miss T. stood motionless, helpless. "It's not bad. I get by."

"No you don't. There's hardly room to walk."

"Will you bring my flowers on Monday? And plant them for me?"

"You're impossible. I will bring them over."

"And carry the feed bags to my shed. I go to the church at 10:00 a.m. to work in the memorial garden, so come before, please."

"You have a nice day, Miss Thurman. Think about what I said."

Miss T. drove away, and Barry wheeled the wagon to his immaculately spotless pickup truck and loaded her plants. He returned the wagon to its home by the annuals.

Whatley's Farm Supply was experiencing a rare moment when no customers demanded his services. Barry gazed around the inside of the store, a warehouse with metal siding and roof. When he had hired on in high school, the place was a mess. Tools were buried and tangled. New seed got sold, and old seed got older and weevil-ridden. Spilled fertilizer covered the floor. The store stank of noxious pesticide fumes. Rats pooped and chewed everywhere. Worst of all, the maggot-infested hams hanging on the wall.

Outdoors, Whatley's had been a jumble of rotting fence posts, crumbling concrete statues, rusting farm implements, and ripped-open mulch bags. In time, Barry organized and cleaned it all and trapped the devilishly smart rats, even coming in on holidays and working without pay. He had built a special room for pesticides and installed ventilation.

He sighed in happiness at the present neatness and then noticed a scrap of string on the floor near the horse ration stacks.

"Barry!" It was old Mr. Whatley yelling from the cash register. "Barry, Ms. Ledford wants four pounds of hairy vetch seed!"

~

Whatley's Supply closed on Sundays and reopened on Mondays, but Barry took off Mondays except in springtime. On his days off, he cut firewood, painted, and performed yard work. He also substituted on a newspaper route, which often got him up early to make the most of the day. Living by himself in a tidy, two-room apartment, he had expenses.

The following Monday, he stopped by Denny's for breakfast and waited until Miss T. was sure to have left for her

church, Fern Prairie Baptist.

He pulled into her driveway and sat awhile, until he noticed the full chicken feed bags lying on the ground in a heap.

Risky, he thought. *Never have done this before.*

He unloaded her plants, carried the dew-dampened feed bags to the shed, and walked up to the front porch. Miss T. kept a key tucked under a weedy flower planter, but Barry had never been in her house. Had looked in through the back door, but never had been inside, not even for the bathroom, because Miss T. didn't let him. Barry was comfortable with the woods.

The front door barely budged—there was stuff piled up behind it. Barry had forgotten she always used the back door. He shoved hard, heard thumping, squeezed through, and gagged. The house reeked of cat pee. With supreme effort, he managed to hold down his Denny's. On a narrow footpath, he crept through the rooms with an expression of disgust and horror stamped on his face. Wild-eyed cats scatted. Cats, but they didn't suppress the mice, which had left calling cards everywhere. Heaps of junk covered the floor, coffee table, couches and chairs, beds.

Where did she sleep?

The dining room and kitchen tables were piled with elongated pyramids, as if Miss T. had been studying angles of repose—Barry fancied he might be an Agricultural Engineer someday. Partly empty food cans, crushed milk jugs, and unwashed dishes and pots had been tossed into mounds in the kitchen.

Where did she eat?

Barry gingerly opened the refrigerator and stepped back.

Smelled like sour, fermenting pig slop.

Barry smiled. Miss T's would be a challenge to rival Whatley's.

He took a last look around to fix the effect in his memory, but something caught his eye. Something unusual he had missed before, obscured by stacks of cardboard boxes. In a corner of the formal dining room sat a card table faced by a folding chair. Barry turned on the desk lamp. The tabletop was

nearly clear, almost neat, with ballpoint pens and sheets of stamps.

Miss T. worked here!

Barry picked up a gaudy, printed sheet of paper from the table.

Miss T. entered sweepstakes!

This from Publishers Discount House "guaranteed" an Alaska cruise. She had filled in the information and stuck a stamp on the envelope. The top cardboard box in the nearest stack was full of promotionals from sweepstakes she had already entered. A hodgepodge of coupons and rebate literature was stuffed in another box. He plucked out a coupon. Expired three years ago.

"Hmm," he hummed.

Outside again, he breathed deeply to purge his lungs. He skipped the lunch hour and mowed his lawns. Afterwards, he drove to the Fern Prairie Baptist, one of those churches that started small in the city and when it grew beyond its walls, added on, and when it grew exponentially, moved into the country for cheaper land. It was nearly 5 o'clock and surely Miss T. had long since departed.

At exactly five, a man with a rounded belly approached a car parked in a space designated for pastors.

Barry ambled over. "Excuse me, sir."

The man glanced at his phone and said, "How can I help you?"

"Not me, but someone in your church. Miss T.—I mean, Miss Thurman."

"Yeah, I know her. She does flowers for the altar once a month."

"Not just the altar. She works in the memorial garden and takes care of your roses."

"She does? I didn't realize."

"Miss Thurman has a problem. She… Her house is a mess. She's got a hoarding, saving, possessive sickness. In her mind, you know. She can't throw anything away. She likes to do crafty things, and she's bought tools and supplies, but they're disorganized, and she can't find anything. So, she buys new

ones and throws *them* down. Cluttered isn't the word. She sees value to every bit of junk and every plant. Plants to her are orphans. She finds them where I work, the scraggly ones, and feels sorry for them, and so she buys them, but her yard has no plan. She has me stick them in randomly, *if* they get planted—the roots usually grow out of the pots first."

"Sounds serious," the man said and looked again at his phone.

"It's worse. She never has anyone visit. She's lonely."

"She's embarrassed to have anyone over."

"Can you help her?" Barry said. "I mean, um, with counseling? Or, I've heard of… *intervention*? Where her friends gather and give her therapy sessions. You could pull a team together and clean out her house while she supervised."

"In circumstances like this, the person should be absent. They couldn't handle seeing other people make decisions about their possessions and property."

"Makes sense," Barry said, convinced.

"Listen, I'm only an associate, but I'll ask Pastor Andy and see what he says. We have a staff meeting first thing tomorrow. I'll bring it up."

"Okay."

"What's your name?"

"Barry Sullivan."

The man shook Barry's hand. "Good to meet you. Do you have a church home?"

"No, sir."

"Come visit us on Sunday. We'd love to have you."

~

In the evening Miss Thurman called. Barry let his message machine answer because he knew it might be her.

"Barry, please help me in my yard," she said, dolefully. "I'm lost without you. No one else will work for me."

Barry moaned.

On his lunch break the next day, he called the church. A secretary answered.

Barry said, "I talked with one of your preachers yesterday. Didn't get his name, but he was supposed to—"

"Probably Richard Thompson. He just left. Uh, he's on vacation tomorrow and won't be back for a couple weeks. Can someone else help you?"

"Well… anybody."

Music came on of a sort Barry had never heard before. He listened to the bawled out, whiny words—like love poetry—but then he realized they were about Jesus. It was a radio station. Before the song ended, "Matt" the announcer came on the radio live, pushing authority into his voice like a talk show host as he discussed an upcoming concert, a fundraiser for the station.

A minute later, a deep, soothing voice cut in and said, "This is Pastor Andy."

"I'm Barry and I talked with Minister Thompson yesterday. He said he'd mention Miss Thurman at your meeting. She needs help with cleaning her house, and she's lonely and needs, just needs people to care for her. Did you all make a decision?"

"What was the name?"

"Barry."

"The name of the other person."

"Miss Thurman."

"Is she a member of our church?"

Barry's whole body clenched. They had *not* discussed Miss Thurman, and this man did *not* know who she was. "Mr. Andy, Pastor Andrew, I'm sorry for wasting your time. You have a good day."

"Well, come see us Sunday morning, young man. We'd be glad to have you."

"Mr. Andrew," Barry said with heat, "Miss Thurman grows your roses and maintains your memorial garden. She arranges your altar flowers."

And then Barry hung up before the preacher could say anything to make him angrier.

~

That afternoon at Whatley's, and while he cooked dinner and later washed and buffed the dishes, Barry stewed over the situation. During the night, he dreamed a monstrously messy

cruise ship glided by, and on deck a crowd of strangers circled a frightened, weepy Miss Thurman. In the morning, the shifting, twisting possibilities settled into an idea.

After work he spent an hour at the public library's computer. Next day, he got off early and drove to a print shop. Before long, he had his materials together and a short speech written.

But who would give it? Maybe Matt would.

He called the radio station. Matt came to the phone.

Barry said, "I'm Barry Sullivan, and I'd like to hire you as, as a voice talent."

"Okay. What are you considering? A commercial? My rate is $300 a studio hour. That's inexpensive in the business."

"It's um, a practical joke."

"Okay."

"I want you to call a friend and tell her she's won an Alaska cruise. Tell her the airplane tickets and cruise details will be sent in the mail, and she might, might have her picture taken."

"What's the purpose of the joke?"

"Promise not to tell anyone?"

"That depends," Matt said.

"Well, I'm really giving her the cruise. I've saved up for braces, but this is more important. I don't want her to know it's from me. She's an older lady who needs encouragement. I work at Whatley's Supply and do her yard work."

"Yard work? Barry, if you're legitimate—and you sound like it to me—I'll call her for you, for free. Send me the script—do you have one?"

"Yeah, and I'll make a donation to your radio station."

~

Miss Thurman believed she had won the Alaska sweepstakes, not at first because she thought it was a scam and the free trip was to Las Vegas; she believed it when Barry's fake literature and the real airplane ticket to Vancouver arrived. She believed it even though no Prize Car appeared at her driveway and no one took publicity pictures, even though the cruise was for one person and not two, and even though

she was able to join the cruise only three weeks after Matt's phone call.

Barry hired his little brother, Earl, who lived in a foster home (it was midsummer when school was out); he rented a dumpster and took vacation days.

Barry and Earl started with a general trash pick up and cleared the furniture into the yard, covering it with tarps. Then they went room by room. They sorted by categories: obvious garbage, sellable items, items to keep, and items for Goodwill. Barry bought shelves and tubs and consolidated and organized her keepsakes and craft supplies. The boys mopped, scrubbed, dusted, deodorized, sanitized, swept, vacuumed, washed, wiped, shampooed, rinsed, dried, shook, folded, and aired; and they trapped the mice. Barry posted duplicate tools and appliances on Craigslist. They worked every day from early morning to late night. They fed the chickens and collected eggs, as Barry had already promised while she was gone.

He carted two sick cats to the vet and locked the others outdoors.

When at last they had perfectly polished the interior of the house, Barry and Earl tackled the yard, mowing, pruning, planting, weeding—work accumulated since Barry had gone "on strike."

The rental company hauled away the dumpster, full.

~

When Miss Thurman arrived back home, refreshed and energized like a filly, she was tickled to see her trimmed and tidied yard, but when she entered the house she was amazed and scared, then devastated, humiliated, and then angry beyond saying.

The police arrested Barry for burglary.

He got out of jail later in the day with a pledge to appear in court. Miss Thurman didn't think it important to prosecute Earl.

After all the help he gave her, Barry was upset with Miss Thurman, so he intended to plead Not Guilty. Their relationship was strained, but Miss Thurman still wanted him to do yard work, and since the house was clean, Barry agreed.

So, when he arrived, Miss Thurman appeared to squash her simmering anger, but also not show how truly pleased she was about her house. And Barry didn't openly gloat when she let him eat lunch at the kitchen table and use the indoor bathroom.

He looked around warily for signs of growing mess. So far, everything looked fine.

Late afternoon, a Buick pulled into the driveway, and from it climbed four women dressed for society, wearing hats and perfume.

"Is this the residence of Miss Thurman?" the first lady asked Barry.

"Yes, ma'am."

She pointed her finger. "You're the *criminal*. We read in the paper. Pastor asked us to pay a call." She straightened her back and proceeded to the house.

"Haven't been convicted yet, ma'am," Barry said behind her.

The other ladies each shook Barry's hand. The last one whispered near his ear, "Good work, Barry. We should have helped Miss Thurman a long time ago. Pastor Andy was embarrassed. Yard looks great, by the way."

At 5:30 Barry knocked at the back door to be paid. Miss Thurman, flushed pink and at the tail of her laugh, greeted him. She scowled when she remembered she was the victim. "Come in," she said, pretending resignation.

A tinkling from the parlor told that the women were collecting their tea cups and saucers.

Barry said, "Here's the money my brother and I made selling your extra things."

She shook her head furiously.

He stood mute while Miss Thurman wrote his paycheck. As usual, he peeked at the amount. He pursed his lips and took a deep breath. It was twice what she ordinarily paid! She tore the check from her book.

"Miss Thurman," he said, beginning a protest.

She stopped him by waving the check in his face, the check snapping in the air. "Don't think I'm letting you off the

hook." Softer, she said, "You have a problem, Barry. You need help yourself."

Barry didn't know what he could safely say. "Thank you, Miss Thurman," was safe enough.

~

No one explained why the trial date actually came speedily.

Itching from a self-inflicted buzz haircut, Barry showed up at the courthouse on the appointed Monday morning. He hadn't hired a lawyer, and he didn't want a public defender, so he had to sit all day and hear the other trials—and a sorry lot of business it was—while waiting for his name to be called. He should have brought the new *Popular Mechanics* his father sent by subscription.

About 4 o'clock, the courtroom emptied except for the bailiff, who eyed Barry with suspicion. A man entered and whispered to the bailiff. The man—apparently the prosecutor—told Barry his trial was beginning.

Then Barry's little brother, Earl, slipped into the seat beside him.

"What are you doing here?" Barry whispered.

Earl just frowned.

Barry pulled in a small breath and blew it out. He stood up and stretched. The courtroom was filling up again, or at least with twenty people, among them Miss T. He collected his materials and walked to the defense table.

"All rise," a new bailiff shouted and introduced the new judge, auctioneer style, as bailiffs do. The Honorable Herbert James Smith.

Miss Thurman testified first. With tears in her eyes and indignation in her voice, she said she had trusted Barry and he trespassed upon her person. That he had no right to organize her life, that if she wanted to live in a messy home, it wasn't his business. Moreover, she said, the young man had discarded her valuable possessions, some of which held precious memories for her.

Barry was moved. He hadn't really thought about this before. Well, he *thought*, but he hadn't *felt*. Maybe Miss

Thurman was right.

When the prosecutor had no more questions for her, Judge Smith asked if the defendant had any. Barry jumped up and cleared his throat. “Um. Miss Thurman, um. What do you allege that I threw away or sold, exactly?”

She glared. Then, self-conscious, she said, “I’m not so sure. I can’t think of anything now.” She laughed a little. “But you had no right.”

“I have an inventory, Your Honor, of everything except for the plain garbage.” Barry held out a sheaf of handwritten notes. “May I?” he asked.

Judge Smith gestured toward the witness box.

Miss Thurman took her glasses and silently read through the lists, her lips moving, hands shifting sheets of paper. “Anyway,” she said, “most of this, I’d say good riddance to, but… Oh, the bread maker. I’d like it back.”

“Did you ever use it?”

“No.”

“Did you ever open the box?”

“No.”

“When did you buy it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe 15 years ago.”

“Did I get a fair price?”

Miss Thurman glanced at the list again. “Yes, but that’s not the point.”

“Is there anything else you wanted to keep?”

She shuffled more pages and stopped. Her eyes misted over. With her voice higher in pitch and breathing in small gasps, she said, “It’s not on a list, but the silk Christmas wreath… My father gave it to me when I was a girl. It had artificial holly leaves and red beads. I know it was falling apart. It was rubbish, really, but it’s all I had from him. All I had.”

She pulled out a handkerchief.

Barry almost felt teary himself.

“I’m done,” Miss Thurman said, and the bailiff helped her from the witness box. As she passed Barry, she said, “You looked nicer with long hair.”

The next person to be called was a complete surprise. Mrs. Conley, the school psychologist, wearing a blue skirt with a grey striped blouse and dangly purple earrings.

At the prosecutor's promptings, Mrs. Conley said, "Barry graduated from high school two years ago. He was a much better-than-average student—B's and a few C's, but with A's in Math and Shop. Nevertheless, Barry had a problem. He bordered on clinical Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder. It never manifested as disabling to *him*, but it drove people—his sibling, adults and other students, the people around him—*crazy* because he manipulated them into participating in his neatness. He wearied people with tediousness about arranging the world to suit his needs. It was a good quality gone awry. I encouraged his parent to find treatment for him, but the parent was intractable."

"Parent?" the prosecutor said. "One parent?"

"His father. His mother died when he was young, and the father never re-married."

"Mrs. Conley, you have a Master's Degree in Psychology?"

"And a Doctorate in adolescent social disorders."

"Then, *Dr.* Conley, in your professional opinion, what are contributing factors to Barry's compulsive disorder?"

Barry jumped up. "Your Honor, this is personal!"

"I believe," Judge Smith said, "the issue is relevant. Go ahead, Dr. Conley."

"Barry's father is a convicted abuser of illegal drugs, and Barry sought to control the emotional chaos around him by organizing his physical environment. It compensated for what he lacked in family stability."

Barry trembled and his face twitched. He had heard people say this sort of thing about him before.

"One more question, if I may," the prosecutor said. "Can people with Barry's condition find help?"

"Yes." Mrs. Conley smiled at Barry. "Once they recognize that they have a problem, the right kind of counseling, and friendship, will help them identify and manage their compulsive impulses when they arise."

"Thank you."

"Mr. Sullivan," Judge Smith said, "do you have any questions for Dr. Conley?"

"Um. Mrs. Conley, did you know you have a lipstick smudge on your teeth?"

Earl in the back sniggered and choked it off.

With eyebrows raised, and mouth clamped shut, Mrs. Conley stared at Judge Smith who glanced away. *He* would not deny or confirm a smudge. Mrs. Conley stepped down and didn't smile again until she had looked into the ladies room mirror.

To Barry's astonishment, Earl took the stand next. Then two of Barry's buddies, then his boss, Mr. Whatley. Even Amy from high school, who, with her sister, he used to take to antique auto shows and bull riding competitions back when he had more time. They all agreed Barry had a problem.

He didn't have the heart to ask any questions.

As if Barry hadn't already been beaten into the dirt, as if he had not been forced, more or less, to watch a YouTube video of himself obsessing over everyone's litter, lint, and clutter, one more person emerged to testify, an emaciated prisoner sporting an orange jumpsuit and dragging a clinking iron chain between his ankles.

Barry set his jaw to prepare for further torment.

Once the bailiff swore in the prisoner, the prosecutor said, "You're Barry Sullivan's father, correct?"

"Yes, sir, he's mine. He'd be a handsome boy, too, if he fixed his teeth." Sullivan opened his mouth wide to show his gums, the upper teeth gone entirely. "That's what meth will do," he said, vaguely flipping one hand.

"Mr. Sullivan, to your knowledge, did your son ever steal anything?"

"He stole my cigarettes and drugs. But he threw them down the toilet, or in the furnace."

"Did he break into your premises to burglarize?"

"Yeah, he discovered where I lived and stole stuff when I was asleep or high. He turned me in to the police, too."

Sullivan had been glancing at Barry throughout, but now

he focused on him. “Barry, I’m sorry for being a bad father. You’re a good boy with good intentions, but you stepped over the line at this lady’s house. I’m worried.”

Judge Smith had been saying, “Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Sullivan,” but Sullivan kept talking.

“Take care of yourself, son, and don’t fret over other people’s messes, people not *family*. You need help. Don’t be me, an addict in jail, old before my time.”

The prosecutor had no more questions for the witness, and Judge Smith asked Barry if he had any. He did.

“Hey, Dad, how’s it going?”

“Been clean a year, since I was arrested. In a decent recovery program, finally. When will you visit?”

“Soon. My next day off. Sorry I haven’t yet. When do you get out?”

“Six months.”

“Good to see you,” Barry said.

“Hey, buddy!” Sullivan called to Earl in the back.

Judge Smith gaveled this drama to a close, disappointing the spectators, all of whom had been afflicted with swelled throats and troublesome tears. A sheriff’s deputy escorted the prisoner out.

“Does the defendant wish to call any witnesses?” Judge Smith asked.

Under his breath, Barry said, “You’ve *talked* to everybody I know,” but out loud he said, “No, sir. I filmed the house before we cleaned, if you’d like to see it.”

The bailiff rolled the TV around so everyone could see. Judge Smith cringed when the disaster panned across the screen, but he kept his face impassive. From the courtroom arose grunts, gasps, and other vocalizations. No one had believed the house had been that bad.

After the video, Judge Smith said, “Then does the defendant wish to make a final statement?”

Barry stood up. “Um, Your Honor. About the burglary. Our work was worth more than the junk we threw away. And, I spent the money I’d saved up for my braces on her plane tickets and the cruise. It’s all gone, the braces money. We—

my brother and I—we really helped her."

From the back of the courtroom (next to Earl) Miss Thurman said, "You had no right."

Judge Smith gently tapped his gavel.

"I know that now," Barry said, turning around. "I do know."

"Okay," Judge Smith said. "Closing remarks from the prosecution?"

The prosecutor stood half-way up. "No, Your Honor. I think we heard a confession."

"I agree. Then…" There was a long, long pause, while Judge Smith fiddled with his gavel. "Then, the court finds Mr. Barry Sullivan guilty of Burglary in the Second Degree." He thumbed open a big book, read silently and said, "Class D Felony. Penalty is… 38 months in jail, suspended, provided that Mr. Sullivan give 80 hours of community service, that he receive court-approved counseling, and… that he buy back as much of Miss Thurman's property as is possible from the proceeds from what he sold. The court so orders."

~

Mondays, Barry began working off his community service at the Fern Prairie Baptist memorial garden with Miss Thurman as his supervisor. After he recovered what little he could of the "stolen property" from the Craigslist sales, he told Miss Thurman he'd bring her those items on his next day off. However, before the day, she called him at noon and insisted he come to her house *right away* after Whatley's.

"*Right away."*

When he arrived, the road in front was packed with cars and the yard jammed with people. Barry thought maybe the house had burned down or Miss Thurman had a stroke, but there were no fire trucks or ambulances. The only similar vehicle was a van painted in outrageous glossy emerald, scarlet, and gold. The house had been painted too, by the Fern Prairie Baptist youth during his recent absence.

Barry tucked in his shirt and wandered through the throng. It was a party, with people rosy-cheeked and whooping. Neighbors, friends, church ladies, stray dogs, and total

strangers. Local reporters with notebooks and cameras. A beaming film crew. Even Amy and her sister.

Was that really the Honorable Judge Herbert Smith leaning against the powder-blue Mustang? Did he just wink at Barry?

A man wearing a gray suit and a pretty woman in a stylish ruby dress held a giant poster resembling a paycheck.

Miss Thurman stood regally on her front porch, the center of the festivity. When she saw Barry inching up the sidewalk, she rushed down the stairs and gave him a bear hug.

"Barry," she cried, "I won the Publishers Discount House Sweepstakes and the Alaska cruise. The Grand Prize! I really won it! Since I already had my cruise, I'm opting for cash and I'm paying for your braces, and I'm giving you a full scholarship to the state university to study Agricultural Engineering."

Barry froze in place, blinking, his mouth open.

"Hey everyone," she shouted breathlessly and waved, "here's the young man!"

The crowd cheered and cameras snapped.

"Miss Thurman," Barry said quietly, "thank you so much for your generous offer. I'm shocked and truly grateful, but I'm wondering about something. It's been bothering me. The jobs I'd like to have someday in engineering… They won't hire a person with a criminal record."

The crowd moved in closer and hushed, so as to hear better.

"Stop obsessing," Miss Thurman said. "I was going to tell you anyway, so it might as well be now. The trial wasn't real, no more than your phony sweepstakes was. Some people in my church put it on, like a charade. We have a trustee who is a County Commissioner, and he reserved the courtroom, and there was a lawyer and a retired judge. It was a payback, Barry, and we got your attention."

"Oh. What about the burglary charges?"

"I had them dropped."

She climbed up the steps and held onto the porch banister. "Hey, everyone!" she shouted as she beckoned, "won't you all

come inside for refreshments?"

Barry stepped aside and watched the people herding into Miss Thurman's neat and clean house; he grinned big and almost sobbed.

END

Well, I love that story and always laugh at the jokes. I envy you having gotten to read it for the first time. The next story will surprise you when you find out who the narrator is. **–MH**

I'm Not a Baby Anymore

Dad adopted me when I was a pup, and we don't look alike at all, but no matter. He was single and kind of old for raising a baby, and not the most responsible parent, either—I mean, he was okay until he… but I'll explain that situation in a minute.

Our friend Jake and his girl Sally would sit around the campfire with us and tell stories. (I love being outdoors with all the delicious smells!) Sometimes they'd be drunk and argue. I was too young to remember it happening, but my favorite story was about my adoption. Jake loved to tell it because he was the lookout and saw it all.

Jake would say, "Old Dad, he'd been scoping *the agency* for weeks and found his baby. Oh, he talked about the baby so much—he loved you, Henry—and we wore out hearing it, so I says, 'Why don't you *adopt* him?' Your Dad declares he'd like that more than the whole world. So, we make a plan. Starting off, we clean up: fresh clothes from Goodwill, a shower at the shelter, cologne.

"At *the agency* Sally goes to the back and asks, could she hold the python. Another clerk lifts you from your pen, Henry, so Dad can, 'see how you act,' and meanwhile, I study the security man. With the snake on her shoulders, Sally freezes and starts screaming like a crazy-woman. Everyone's now distracted. Dad snatches you up, stuffs you under his jacket, and walks out the door. When Security Man gives chase, I step in his way and down he spills. He being heavy, me being light—I'm escaped. Gone."

That was Jake talking, remember. If he ever messed up and said, "Purebred English Bulldog—worth a barrel of money," Sally shushed him and Dad looked worried.

Dad always finished the story. "Oh, I ran and ran, Henry. Ran like the wind. We've got our secret place here in the woods where the police can't find us, and we live like kings."

Then he'd massage my neck, pick me up, and cradle me back and forth. We were happy.

~

Sally's belly grew large, and one day she came home with a new pup, a scrawny, hairless runt. Jake beamed with pride, but Dad became upset. He whimpered and twitched in his sleep and cried, "My babies, my babies." I'd snuggle in closer, and he'd put his arm around me and squeeze.

~

Somehow Jake found a little extra money and asked Dad to babysit the runt so he and Sally might go on a date. It was a cool, quiet, fall evening and Dad built a cozy fire. We ate stew. Dad warmed Sally's milk and fed the pitiful creature. He set it down asleep on a pad.

Then we noticed: flashing lights and gruff voices.

"Police!" Dad barked.

He gaped at the runt and he gaped at me. I thought it was an easy decision—pick me, obviously—but Dad twisted back and forth in agony and pulled his scruffy beard.

The tense voices approached, sour scents and more lights.

"Oh my gosh, I don't know what to do," Dad whined. "I can't save you both." Suddenly he grabbed the runt and ran like the wind. Like a speedy spider on its back legs.

I couldn't believe it. He'd left me behind. I tried to keep up, but it was impossible—I was breathing too hard—so I lay down on the path and waited.

The nice police officers gave me pie, and in the morning one took me to a place called the Pet Store. Those odd people clapped their hands and exclaimed how big I was. After awhile I went to live with Kayla in an apartment. It's too clean, but she feeds me crunchy food and I enjoy our walks. Walking is more fun than being packed around in a blanket or pushed in a shopping cart as Dad always did. Not long ago Kayla and I saw Dad at the park playing catch with a spritely female. She'd race along, leap into the air, and clamp her teeth on a disk.

I'm glad Dad found a friend, one to run with him. Hmm. She's kind of cute, actually.

Yeah. I'm really glad I'm not a baby anymore.

END

Animals have minds of their own, that's for sure. I often wish I could see the world a little like they do. It would be wild. I don't know what I need to say here about the next story, but there is plenty about it in the ***Extras*** *at the end of the book, if you are interested.* **–MH**

The Cruller Twist

A bright spring noon and there's Nicole, brunette and as trim as I remember her, sitting at the café table along the sidewalk. "Lauren!" she says and jumps up. "Wow. So glad you came. What a wonderful reunion for my birthday."

We hug and I say to her, "You look so good, Nicole."

"You do, too."

"I can't believe it's been, how many? Five years since graduation?"

"Yeah!" Nicole says. "We're really looking forward to your concert tonight."

"My first in Asheville. Here's a… here's a present for you. I hope it's not too big."

Nicole reaches into the decorative bag and lifts out a snowy white hoodie emblazoned with a Duke Blue Devil. "Perfect, it's perfect!" she says, holding it up.

We squirm into our chairs, order salads from the gorgeous, flirty waiter, and catch up on news. Lunch arrives in the middle of our relaxed talk about travel, classical vocal music, and a battle against weight for me; a semi-career, marriage, and children for Nicole.

"Sorry I couldn't come to your wedding," I say. "Oh, your birthday reminds me. Your twin brother. How's he doing?" Nicole had often spoken of Steve when she and I were roommates, and I always hoped to meet him.

"He's great. Though he'd rather be married by now. A girl he liked a lot shied away recently because of his medical condition. Did you hear he developed Type One diabetes in his final year of culinary school?"

"Nooo! What a cruel twist."

She gives me a wry, amused look. "Yeah, a cruel twist, especially since desserts, pastries, and candy were his passion. He always had a sweet tooth. He kept getting thinner and we thought it was his frantic schedule. Then one Friday he called

home and said his vision was blurry. Mom and Dad thought it was eye strain and suggested he rest over the weekend and go to the campus clinic on Monday. The nurse knew right away—they see one or two late-onset cases every year. They gave him insulin and sent him to an endocrinologist."

"He's okay?"

"He's on a pump and lives a disciplined life. Almost a normal life. It's a condition that could kill him, if he doesn't take care of himself. He could go blind or lose his legs."

The waiter reappears with the diabolical timing of his profession; he whisks up our plates and asks, "Thinking dessert? We have a sinfully delectable chocolate cake today. A dark decadent cake with luscious raspberry sauce. You'll love it, I'm sure."

How clichéd, and bad even without the subtle innuendo in his voice. I shouldn't, and almost say yes, but Nicole speaks first. "Thanks, but no."

"Are you diabetic, too?" I ask her.

"Just saving for later."

The waiter turns to me. His attentive brown eyes might make me believe he cares.

"I'll take a piece."

"Good choice. Awesome," he says and glides away.

As I watch him disappear, the conversation pauses, a long caesura, a cessation in our duet, and I'm feeling buzzy and encumbered like I've eaten too much, like muscle memory from past indulgence. Nothing about this cake is right. I glance at Nicole, who's watching me. In college she always was sensible in demeanor and secure in her relationships, but she still managed to be empathetic to me and must know what I'm feeling now. The waiter glides up, places the object before me, and moves to the next table.

"Guess what?" I say to Nicole, "Changed my mind. I'll wait until later, too."

"Good choice," she says, with a sigh, as if I had nearly failed an easy exam.

She knows the subtext from our college years. Not long ago I would have offered this waiter my latest CD, or left it as

a tip with my card, an invitation for drinks in my hotel room…

We pay the bill, stroll along the sidewalks, peer into antique shops, stare at the weird and fascinating pedestrians, admire the eccentric architecture, and breathe the breezy mountain air.

Nicole stops to send a text message. "Just touching base with hubby," she says.

On a corner I drop a twenty for the fiddlers playing earthy Swedish tunes. "Your brother," I say at last. "Did he finish culinary school?"

"The diabetes set him back, but he graduated with his class. He took an incomplete that he made up later."

"So, what's he doing now? Did he change focus?" With this, I'm certain Nicole has finally caught my interest.

She only grins and I don't understand. She keeps grinning. Then I see behind her into a window full of pastries and chocolates, the window with the shop's name painted on the glass. The tables inside are crowded with people sipping from cups and munching food. Nicole is already opening the door, and the charming bell atop issues a soprano trill. A fruity, caramel aroma pours from the doorway.

What an odd coincidence, our being right here, The *Cruller* Twist.

Noisy chatter with a backdrop of music, a cello sonata. "Welcome girls," the man in fashionable dusty white says as he steps away from some customers. He looks good, better than Nicole—a masculine version of her—and taller. He's wearing glasses and hasn't shaved since yesterday. "Happy birthday, dear sister. I have something special for you." He bends to kiss Nicole, leaving her with a floury cheek. "I'm Steve," he says in a quieter tone and takes my wilted hand.

"I'm Lauren."

Nicole and I slide into a corner booth, and he waltzes up with two plates of a divine miracle, a lit candle placed in one of the portions. "All organic," he says. "You'll have to help me, Lauren. Tell me if anything's wrong, because I seldom taste anymore. Not even my sugar-free treats. It makes abstinence easier. Like the deaf composer, don't you think?

The celibate priest who conducts weddings."

Nicole takes a breath for her candle.

"Wait. Wait," he says. "Let me grab some toasted pecans, another candle, and I'll join you. Coffee, Lauren? I hear you're a singer."

The poor soprano up front trills again, and in maneuvers an athletic guy with a toddling cherub at his hand and a chubby cherub in a backpack. All smiles, they approach our corner. "Surprise!" the guy says. The toddler climbs into Nicole's lap and blows out her candle.

Surely, this is paradise. Right place, right dessert, and Steve—a man with generous self-control. I wonder if Nicole would have brought me here if I had eaten the cake back at the café.

It's not my birthday, but I make a wish.

END

Did you like that one? The next story is light-hearted, but pretty serious when you think about it. **–MH**

Just Cold

When the doorbell rang, Mr. Reynolds went to answer. The young man on the front steps popped open a beer can he had pulled from his ragged, oversized coat. “Are you on the wagon?” he asked, and offered Mr. Reynolds the first slug.

“Lee,” Mrs. Reynolds called from behind her husband. “It’s freezing outside. The chowder? The children are hungry.”

“We’re sitting down for supper,” Mr. Reynolds said to the boy. “What, what’s your name?”

“Jeffrey. I’ve got some peanuts. Give them to your kids.” He set the beer down and fumbled at his coat. “That’s a nice manger scene in your yard. It’s like *real*.”

Mr. Reynolds gently closed the door, which made a soft click. He looked at his wife and said, “That was awkward.”

“Maybe we should invite him in.”

“You didn’t smell him.”

“I guess there’s always the homeless shelter.”

The Reynolds family resumed their happy Christmas Eve meal, and afterwards, Mrs. Reynolds passed around a tray of fancy dried pears.

Then the doorbell rang again.

“It’s probably our malodorous friend.” This time Mr. Reynolds peeked through the curtains first. “Oh!” he said, stepping backwards. “The police.” He jerked the door open.

The officer was watching the darkening sky. “Sorry to disturb you, but we’ve had a call from one of your neighbors about a guy bothering people.”

“He left here twenty minutes ago.”

“You won’t arrest him, will you?” Mrs. Reynolds asked.

“We’ll just drop him at the shelter. It’ll be a bitter cold one tonight. By the way, this was on your stoop.”

Mr. Reynolds took the unopened bag of unshelled peanuts.

“What’s malodorous mean?” the oldest child, Lacy, asked.

~

The next morning while it was still dark, the Reynolds children jumped out of bed to empty their stockings. They found candy canes, flashlight batteries, walnuts, and new pocketknives. Mrs. Reynolds had prepared cinnamon rolls, eggs and sausage, and a fresh fruit salad for breakfast.

Mr. Reynolds built a fire in the fireplace. "Before we eat, let's read about the wise men bringing presents, because they're why we give gifts at Christmas. And let's bundle up and read at our nativity display."

"You realize it's ten degrees," Mrs. Reynolds said.

"We won't be long."

The children donned warm coats, hats, and gloves. The frigid air outside stung their noses, and heavy, lowering clouds oppressed them. Lacy ran to the stable, stopped, and screamed. "A dead person! A body!" She screamed again, stumbled backward, and fell.

Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds sped from the house.

"Where?" Mr. Reynolds said somberly. He moved closer and with forced calm said, "Take the children indoors, dear." He dialed 911, and knelt by the body. It was Jeffrey curled up in the straw right next to the manger with baby Jesus inside. Jeffrey had borrowed a shepherd's cloak for a pillow. He lay rigid and unmoving…

When the glittering ambulance rolled in, neighbors gathered at the edge of the yard. A cloud of steam ascended from their midst, their combined breath. A few snowflakes drifted down.

Wearing a Santa hat and carrying a red duffel bag, a paramedic approached the victim. As a second paramedic arrived, his stretcher jingling with bells, the first paramedic rubbed Jeffrey hard on the chest. No response. He felt for a pulse and said, "We'll need a body bag." He bent down to check for respiration. While he listened, his stern expression melted into puzzlement; he straightened up and said, "What the…?"

Jeffrey opened his eyes, sat up, and looked around, amazed.

"How? How are you feeling?" the paramedic asked.

Jeffrey only shivered.

"Get a blanket," the paramedic said to his partner. "Sir, I'll need to ask you some questions to ascertain your alertness. What day is it?"

Jeffrey thought for a moment, then slurred, "Christmas."

"Where are you?"

"Bethlehem."

"Who is the presi— Never mind. We need to transport you to the hospital. You've spent a night outdoors and you're probably hypothermic."

"Don't want the hospital. I'm just cold."

"He can come in our house," Mr. Reynolds said eagerly. "Bring him inside."

"You should go to the hospital, but we can't force you."

"The house, if it's okay."

The paramedic turned to Mr. Reynolds. "Are you sure?"

Mr. Reynolds glanced around at his nativity scene. He drew one deep breath and another. A tremble seized him and he covered his eyes with the back of his forearm, as if he could hide.

Jeffrey struggled to stand, but couldn't and quit. "I know, I'm a nuisance and probably dangerous. The hospital, then."

"No, no. Jeffrey, I'm sorry I shut the door on you last night. It was wrong. Please, please come inside."

Jeffrey smiled a slow, stiff smile.

The paramedics helped him to his feet, and the neighbors cheered and hurried toward their comfortable homes. The Reynolds children dashed out, tucked themselves under Jeffrey's arms, and boosted him along.

The second paramedic smirked and whispered to the first, "A body bag? You're losing your edge."

"I'd swear the patient was dead," the first said quietly. "He was a refrigerated corpse."

"A miracle?"

"A mystery."

"You didn't notice the glowing plastic angel? All right, let's go. Busy morning."

"Thanks!" Mr. Reynolds called to them.

"Nothing else we'd rather be doing," one called back.

Mrs. Reynolds ushered Jeffrey and the children into the den, with its colorful decorated tree, the bright blazing fire, and treasures spread across the floor. They seated Jeffrey in the largest, coziest chair and pulled off his stinky boots. Mrs. Reynolds brought a mug of hot chocolate.

A quiet minute passed. Jeffrey hummed a sound of contentment and slurped at his steaming chocolate. The fire crackled cheerfully in the fireplace.

"Umm… Will, umm," Mr. Reynolds stammered. "Will you join us for breakfast? And afterwards when we open presents? We ah… have something for you. A present, or two."

"That'd be nice," Jeffrey said in a sigh. "How about a hot bath first? Any peanuts? *Boiled* peanuts?"

Mr. Reynolds scowled. Now *this* was awkward.

END

Being kind to strangers sounds nice, and it's essential to life, but it doesn't mean it will be easy, right? The title of the next story is a word I made up, but it has an important meaning. **–MH**

Deprescience

As a child, our son Timothy told his teachers he was adopted. During adolescence, he wailed in misery, certain that his best friends had moved away. By age twenty, Timothy's grief sank into glum desolation, and he would lie on the bed all day, bemoaning an imaginary poverty. None of his therapists could free him from his flawed perception of loss.

Saying, "sign up or move out," my husband Bill and I finally pushed him into enrolling at the community college, where he takes literature courses. Now in his early twenties, Timothy sits at home reading novels or staring into the tropical fish tanks.

One Friday afternoon when I came home from work, I found him eating a bowl of ramen noodles at the breakfast counter.

"How's your day been?" I asked.

He pushed a paper toward me across the counter. The letter "A" and the word "Incredible!" were scrawled in red across the top.

"You won't want to read it," he said in a monotone. "It's the same stuff about my family and friends who disappeared."

I had stopped arguing with him years ago — stopped telling him in hysterical terms how we were his natural parents, that his memories were false, that he had not been robbed of a fortune and no one had abandoned him.

"Writing is a healthy outlet for you, Tim," I said.

He gently cleared his throat. "I suppose."

"I'd like to read it."

He just shrugged his shoulders, slid off the stool, and put his empty bowl into the dishwasher.

"Your dad and I plan to see Grandma Ostenson tomorrow at the hospice center," I said. "She won't be around much longer. Will you come with us?"

"Grandma Ostenson? Why? I never visit her."

"You won't have another chance."

"I mean, I don't even know her."

"My mother was troubled," I said.

Tim blinked like he usually did before an emotional episode. "She's barely aware. She's going to die when we get there, anyway."

"You'd be keeping us company."

He looked at me with something like pity for a needy stranger. "Yeah, I would be."

"Do you have plans for the weekend?"

He whisped air from his nose at my absurd question.

"Well," I said, "I'm putting my feet up for a few minutes before I start supper. What would you like?"

"Nothing. But thanks."

I took Timothy's paper upstairs, thinking that I'd fall asleep during the second paragraph, but I didn't. Instead, I moved to the window for better light. Ever since he was little, Tim had communicated his delusions, but never with such realism, and never with any rational perspective.

The prompt had been, "Your fountain of joy." Tim had written about a wife and children, a career as a novelist, acclaim from intelligent readers, pleasure in research and storytelling, satisfaction in hard physical work, and purpose from sharing life with others.

But the ending of the essay… The last paragraph said, "Only recently have I realized that the memories exist merely in my head, fixed there forever, as if a malicious scientist planted them to torture me, which means they will never give joy, but will always burden me with the pain of separation. My hope is that someday the pain will subside."

~

When we arrived at the hospice, Mom was propped up on pillows; her eyes were open and her breathing was labored. After a while, she said, "It's nice to see you."

I babbled on as if she understood every word. Between her cat-naps she appeared to enjoy our company, especially Timothy, who sat next to her. When I mentioned his paper, she said, "Read it to me, please. Read it all."

"Sorry Mom, we didn't bring—" Bill said, but Timothy was pulling a copy from his pocket.

As Tim read, her mind seemed to open like an evening primrose and when he reached the end, she said, "I remember that story… I've seen it before."

"What do you see, Grandma?" Tim said.

She fumbled and took his hand. "Timmy?"

"Yes, Grandma."

"Dear child, it's a gift. Those people and experiences you feel are gone—they've not come to you yet. Your memories aren't memories. They're visions of your future. I had the same condition."

"We're clairvoyant?"

She nodded faintly. "Until I resigned myself to loss, real or not, I couldn't be thankful for the present… for the people in my life. I prevented my joyful future. Accept your losses, baby, even self-inflicted ones. Give and receive love."

She drifted into unconsciousness again and then stirred enough to say, "I wish I'd known you, I could have told you before. But, I'm glad… you came to visit."

Timothy looked at his grandmother and blinked rapidly, her words working in him, maybe re-forming his life as we watched. He then gathered his father and me into his arms and cried unashamedly. We wept with him. At last when all this new grief was purged, we saw that my mom was gone, her breath stilled, her face serene.

We watched in silence until Bill said, "Tim, go tell them at the desk, okay?"

After Tim rinsed his face and left, I asked Bill, "What do you think about the family gift?"

He touched Mom's hand and sighed. "I'm not sure. You don't have it."

I walked to the door. Down the hallway, Tim was leaning against the counter at the nurses' station.

A minute later he returned, his face wearing an allusion to a smile. "They'll be here soon," he said. "No hurry." Another silent moment passed until Timothy said, "What's the name of the duty nurse? The young one. Brunette."

"Margaret," I said. "She's vivacious, isn't she?"

"She looks familiar."

"She likes good literature, Tim," my husband said.

Timothy blinked and said, his voice caught between a sob and a laugh, "Yeah, I know."

END

The lesson here, I think, is your life is never hopeless. It has meaning and promise. The next story is silly, and pure fun. And short. **–MH**

Spark

"Welcome to the edge of the universe," I said cheerfully. "The very edge."

The clutch of tourists easing into my parents' store seemed overawed. At night, part of our sky is lit with nebulae, pulsars, galaxy clusters, and all sorts of stuff, but the rest of the sky is black, pitch black. As far as anyone knows, no electromagnetic phenomena, gravity, or nothing ever emanates from out there.

"We're stocked with souvenirs, snacks, drinks, contraband cigarettes, and camping supplies at wallet-gouging prices," I said as the customers fanned out among the aisles. "Hot showers cost a fortune per minute."

"Excuse me, young fellow. Postcards?" the sweet little grandma asked.

I stepped around the counter to show her the rack for our best seller: a jet black card with the caption 'Beyond the Horizon'.

"I'd like a dozen," she murmured to herself.

Tourists. I don't figure what they've come to see, but they know how to spend.

"Where's the hotel?" a man in a sweater and shorts asked.

"Our planet doesn't have hotels, sir, since it's a park, except for the few concessionaires like us. If you want a room, you'll have to stay a parsec or two closer toward the Center."

"That's too bad," he said. "We've come so far already."

"We have plenty of camping spaces," I said. "Campers bring lawn chairs, extra blankets, and sit up all night staring into the dark void."

"Do you rent gear?"

"Whatever you need."

~

Early in the offseason, two of my school buddies thought we should take an adventure. Dad owns a junker Galaxship

that once carried the mail, so my friends and I took it apart, cleaned everything, recharged the quantum cells, put it back together with the safeties disabled, and loaded up all the canned beans, frozen steak, citrus concentrate, and beer it could hold. We charted a course directly away from the Center and launched.

At first it was fun. I mean, because even scientists never attempt this. Before long it got boring, but honestly, when we weren't lifting weights and watching movies, or playing video games, we slept. Outside, absolutely everywhere was black, black, black as we traveled four years as close to c^2 as we dared.

Then one of my buddies, Janos, said, "We should stop." So we did, and other than the ship not rattling and shaking, we'd have hardly known. We looked homeward to find that the universe had shrunk to an infinitesimal spark of light.

"Holy Higgs Boson!" Janos said. "We flew faster than we thought."

I took a picture.

A quiet minute afterwards, my other buddy, Rasper, said, "I'm scared. Let's go back now." So, we did. The tiny dot of the universe grew until four years later (minus a month) our planet emerged into view.

When I walked into the store, Mom asked, "How was it?"

"Okay. I'm glad to be home. It's not so bad here."

"That's how I felt," Dad said. "You're just in time. The tourist crush begins this weekend."

Anyway, that picture I took of our infinitesimal spark? We couldn't decide on a caption, but we make a ton of money from the new postcard regardless. Maybe, just maybe I can now afford to go someplace really fantastic and astonishing, like Auntie Katum's for a slice of her famous blueberry pie.

END

Spark*: The important thing in all the whole universe: Homemade blueberry pie! And something else, which you will see next.* **–MH**

Genius

Brad heaved what might be a truncated stainless steel water heater onto his table under the ancient live oaks.

"Still peddling your miraculous apparatus?" Marquis said and plucked a dog-eared brochure from Brad's stack. "Looks dubious, old man. Hmm… Lead lining and rechargeable battery."

"If I was a person of color like yourself…"

"Bullscat. Everybody got a color."

Cars swished by on the road. Breezy. Hot. Seagulls gliding overhead. Marquis stood behind his van, handing out bags of fresh shrimp and ice, taking in cash, improvising rhymes. Brad sagged in a chair at his tailgate while massaging the small of his back.

A Cadillac squeezed between the road and the salesmen, the driver one of those southern ladies who never sweats, but only glows. She left the engine running. "Two pounds of jumbos, please." The Cadillac's air conditioner kicked into high gear. "What are *you* selling?" she asked Brad.

"I invented… Um… It converts matter to energy, ma'am."

"What's it for?"

Marquis grinned like he knew what was coming.

"It'll power your house for pennies a month. I mean, using gravel from your driveway."

"Our driveway is paved."

Brad sighed.

"We *do* need backup for hurricane season."

"Eighty-nine hundred dollars," Marquis said.

The lady lit up, impressed.

"What? He's lying," Brad said, pink turning maroon. "I'm asking five hundred."

"Decent price," she said, diminished considerably.

"Want a demonstration?" Brad asked, but the woman and her jumbos were moving toward the Cadillac. They rolled

away.

"Her manner of saying 'hot dang scam,'" Marquis said. "Have you tried selling electricity to the utility company, genius?"

"Nobody believes me. I wrote to research universities. A few sent me form letters. It was ten years before I created a single watt. Another ten before the generator stopped overheating. Then Dad died, my wife left, my son moved away, and our metal scrap business slid downhill. The creditors got mean and my property taxes are delinquent. Hey, I'll give *you* a demonstration."

Marquis laughed. "No, no, please."

Brad looked down the road. "I don't care anymore."

Shadows crept underfoot as the sun arced over the trees. Trailing beards of Spanish moss swayed leeward. Shrimp customers came and went. Sold out, Marquis dumped the remaining ice and stowed his coolers.

"Here's a pound I saved for you. Take it, free."

"I don't need anything."

"Don't be a jackass. Take it."

"If you insist. Thanks. It means a lot."

Marquis began lifting his folding table when a leg dropped off and thumped to the ground.

"Cacapoo!"

Brad grabbed the broken leg, his face twitching like he was recalculating his entire life. "Okay. Bring it to my junkyard and I'll weld it."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know." Marquis frowned at the stainless steel tub. "But you *can* weld."

Brad packed up and Marquis followed in his van along a languid river. Auction notices and No Trespassing signs glared from the high fence surrounding the junkyard. Brad unlocked the gate and beckoned Marquis in. They entered a building of weathered wood, rusted sheeting, and slimed windows. Brad emitted a curse in the dim light. Marquis flopped his hand along the wall. Found a switch, but nothing happened.

"One second," Brad said. Eyes adjusted, he selected a banana peel and a candy wrapper. Unscrewed a hatch in another tub, dropped in the garbage, tightened the hatch, and mashed a button. The machine hissed and began to purr, at which time blinding lights popped on everywhere and speakers blasted mind-splitting psychedelic rock. Brad rushed outside, dragged in the table, tossed it onto a workbench, and hooked up a clamp. He jerked on leather gloves, pulled a helmet over his head, snatched up another clamp with a welding rod attached.

"Don't look!" he shouted and slammed the face shield down.

The walls flashed like a baby sun was born into Brad's hands. Crackling and humming. Metallic smoke rising. Fingers jammed in his ears, mouth open, Marquis marveled at the pulsing shadows.

"Hey, breaker box! Fan! Turn it on!" Brad jabbed a finger toward a corner.

The giant exhaust fan's thunder overwhelmed all other sound.

A long minute later, the baby sun went dark. Brad flipped up his shield and made a cutting motion at his neck. "Fan! Stereo!"

The building hushed except for Brad's tapping.

"Wow," Marquis whispered. "Wow." He stared at the generator, then wandered around the shockingly messy room. On a counter sat a full bottle of rum, a headlamp, a bag of pills, and a box stuffed with unopened mail.

"Past due bills," Brad said. "But none for electricity."

Marquis picked up a handful of envelopes. "You got a letter here. A personal letter."

Brad threw down his hammer, grabbed the letter, and dropped into a chair. Opened it and read. He was quiet.

"What?"

"From my son."

"That's good, right?"

"You don't understand. Those pills? If I didn't sell a generator today, I planned to swallow them with the rum.

Everything but the generator has failed. I've sacrificed everything else and finally gave up. But when your table broke, I was needed."

Marquis waited.

"Ralphie wants me to live with him."

"Will you?"

Wet-eyed, Brad nodded vigorously. "Judy and my grandkids want to see me." Brad started packing in a whirlwind, Marquis pitching in.

"Listen," Brad said. "The device is patented, and the plans, equations, diagrams, procedures, and manufacturing techniques are in a safe-deposit box in custody of my lawyer. He hasn't been paid, so he won't be cooperative. But here's a notarized document giving it all to you. Read the fine print. Fill in your name. I built two generators and I'm taking one. Here are all your keys."

Marquis was awestruck.

Brad loaded the suitcases into his pickup and jumped in the driver's seat. "God bless!"

Marquis watched Brad roar away. He returned inside and switched off the generator. The room's lights faded. Definitely needed better storage batteries. He felt his way to the door and drove the van out through the entrance. Locked the gates and stood back. My lucky day, he thought. He owned a miraculous invention, one to revolutionize the energy industry and make him fabulously rich.

Unbelievable.

All of a sudden he felt a horrible fear. Brad had left so fast and looked so relieved. What if the machine is a *curse*? What if he ends up like Brad, wasting his whole life in futility and frustration? What if the only way to escape is to convince another sucker to adopt the cause?

A hot dang scam!

Nah, Marquis thought. Bullscat. Sell shrimp, sell anything.

END

People can sacrifice everything for fame and success and still fail, but there's always a good option out. Perhaps thinking about someone else. So, next is another story about Harold Stumbo, of when he realizes something is wrong. **–MH**

Denying the Signs

Vehicles inched forward, barely leaving enough room for Harold Stumbo to swing his crew-cab pickup through the gap in the center guardrail. The four-horse trailer loaded with the thoroughbreds and hay followed dutifully in the U-turn.

Riding shotgun, Norma glanced up from her paperback romance, sighed and said, "It's nice. We're free of the traffic jam, but now we're going *back* to Roanoke Island."

Raiden, Harold's teenage helper around the farm, spoke from the heap of luggage and sleeping bags piled on him in the rear seat. "*I* never *wanted* to evacuate."

"A Category-3 hurricane is terrifying. Your parents won't be happy we're turning around."

"*They're* not leaving the island."

No one else was driving in the lanes leading back toward the long bridge that crossed the Croatan Sound, and Harold felt relieved to be moving again, even if toward a potential catastrophe. His life had always been this way. Whenever things seemed easy, he paid a high price. Only when plodding ahead did he accomplish anything worthwhile. Still, the frozen inland-bound evacuation traffic might never clear. Probably there'd been an accident.

Harold leaned down to see the upper sky through the windshield. Grey, torn clouds soared southward, just then flinging another blinding rain shower at them. He switched on the hopeless wipers.

"Why didn't we just travel inland in the free lanes?" Raiden asked. "Instead of returning."

Harold pulled to the shoulder and stopped. "Why didn't you suggest this earlier?"

"I figured you forgot something. Left something behind."

Harold looked at Norma, who seemed absorbed in her novel. The rain ceased and he opened the door of the pickup. "I'll be a minute." He climbed over the guardrail and slid-walked down the embankment to a cluster of trees, their leaves

rattling in the stiff breezes. He needed to empty his bladder, but really, he needed to think. He didn't know why he had started back to the island. It didn't make any sense, and it scared him. Was this his first hint of Alzheimer's?

When he reached the pickup truck, the glittering blue lights of a State Trooper were approaching, the cruiser leading bumper-to-bumper lines of cars, vans, and trucks on the wrong side of the road away from the impending storm.

"Uh, oh," Raiden said. "We're trapped."

A few minutes later another trooper pulled up. "Mayor Stumbo, sir. Are you all right? We met at the All Outer Banks 10k last weekend."

"Officer Melton," Harold said, reading from the name badge. "Good, good to see you again. We're headed to… To, ah… I thought I'd give Emergency Management a hand as the hurricane makes its landfall."

The officer frowned at Harold and glanced toward the horse trailer, which had shifted in a sudden gust of side wind. "Are you sure, sir?"

Harold nodded. "Of course."

"Let me turn around and I'll guide you back to Manteo on the shoulder. The bridge may be vacant by the time we arrive, so you should be able to cross."

"*This* will be exciting," Raiden said, the tone of his voice loaded with ominous irony.

END

The photo above is from another Atlantic coast island. Nantucket. I'd like to write a whole book of Harold Stumbo stories, and see it made into a TV series. Anyway…

For now, here's one more. **–MH**

Leaving Roanoke Island

Good kids, Harold Stumbo thought.

He nodded goodbye to the female FBI agent in the Jeep Cherokee as it swung around in his white gravel driveway, and he caught a glint from his neighbor's house across the pasture. Probably the rascal was watching through binoculars, hoping his new friends would be escorting Harold away in handcuffs.

The agents were investigating violent mob activity and found him inadvertently. Even though he had retired, they asked to see tax returns for the past five years. Well, he didn't have any of those, did he? Check account statements? Well, he didn't have a checking account, either. Never did. He wasn't lying because you never lie to the FBI—that's a crime they'll nail you with in a heartbeat. So that he could recall what he had said to them, he had recorded the entire interview.

Harold waved toward the Jeep, now passed from sight, flipped a bird in the direction of the neighbor, stepped inside the front door, and lifted a daypack stuffed with envelopes.

The agents would return later with a search warrant and probably an indictment for tax evasion. It'd be a quick search because he kept no written records whatsoever, and anyhow, he wouldn't be here. They couldn't give a damn about his career illegal bookmaking on horse racing and other sports. The government only wanted their tax money, plus interest and penalties, and they'd imprison him for longer than he'd live.

The boy, leading his own horse, Jasper, approached from Harold's barn. "Okay, Mr. Stumbo, I'm ready for the envelopes."

"You're not riding your bicycle?"

"Pony express."

Harold laughed too loud. He'd desperately miss the boy who had been helping him and his wife around their gentleman's farm for the past two years, ever since the

hurricane devastated the island. “I posted a letter to your dad yesterday, certified mail. It’s your gift from Norma and me.”

“Thank you.”

“It entails responsibility.”

The boy wouldn’t find out until Harold and his wife were well on the way to a cabin in eastern Kentucky, in a hollow up a slate-paved creek doubling as road. They were giving him the entire Roanoke Island farm, including the house, barns, and twenty-one acres. Norma had reminded Harold over breakfast this morning that, because they were childless, a year ago they deeded the property to the boy in a trust, anticipating when the government someday might attempt to seize their assets.

“You’re taking the thoroughbreds?” the boy asked, following with a quick grin, not able to conceal his excitement that the stallion, mare, and their colt might be his.

“You’ll have to wait.” Harold evaded because he didn’t want a scene. No happy dances, cheers, or blubbering. No awkward words, please. “Start with my neighbor. His letter says I’m giving him the power tools and lumber for his silly woodworking projects. It doesn’t say I hope they’ll make him feel guilty.”

"You're giving away everything?"

"Almost."

"You won't ever be back," the boy said, his voice quivering. He dropped Jasper's reins and marched up the steps toward Harold like he might hug him. Norma pushed open the screen door, rescuing Harold by taking the hug herself and sniffing like she expected to sneeze. The boy lurched to try again to hug Harold, who thrust out the daypack for a barrier.

Harold cleared his throat, but couldn't say anything.

The boy slipped on the pack, pounded down the steps, and leaped up into the saddle. Jasper fidgeted and they trotted off toward Neighbor Guy, who crept outside to meet them. Yep, the neighbor—what's his face—had been watching.

"Is the Land Cruiser loaded?" Harold asked Norma.

"Last night. I told you, already."

"My Alzheimer's?"

She bobbed her head.

"How many years have we lived here?"

"Umm… Eighteen."

"Well, say goodbye to the place."

He wrapped his arm around hers and they strolled to the garage. He hit the remote key button and the door rumbled open. As they drove out, his neighbor was looking down, distracted with skimming his letter, and the boy had already ridden away. Harold turned left from the driveway onto the highway access road. Norma opened up her romance paperback, and Harold put some Old Time music on the radio.

"How will we survive, Jimmy?" Norma asked after a few minutes. "You'll have to work again. Can I call you Jimmy now, Mr. Gant?"

"If I can call you Marilyn."

Her face brightened with an unexpected smile, reminding Harold of when she was young and pretty.

"It won't be easy," she said. "We haven't gone by our real names since we were married. Umm… It's simple not to lie when you don't remember anything. If you're working again, I need to help. I'm good with faces and math."

"You *are* good with them, and directions. Put the book down and look at your map, so we don't get lost."

"I will. By the way, Jimmy, my real name isn't Marilyn, either."

Harold drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Please jog my memory, dear."

END

We never find out Norma's real name. I don't know what it is, so don't ask me. Be sure to check out the **Extras** *section at the end of this book for background on this and the other stories. Next, be prepared for your mind to be turned inside out, upside down, and backwards.* **–MH**

Not the Wrong Planet

The *Radiant* entered a high, slow orbit around Lumen.

Alone in his tiny quarters, Specialist Johnten stared from the port window at the charcoal-black nightside of the planet. No lights broke the gloom below.

Bleak and empty, he wrote in his field notebook. *Our initial proximity view of an Earth-similar sphere circling the first dark star ever discovered.*

Dark star. A black hole in particular effects, but lower in mass and bound to a region of dark matter. Though Johnten worked hard at astrophysics, his professional expertise was in anthropology, and Earth Command had recruited him for the remote chance the *Radiant* encountered advanced sentient beings.

Surely no opportunity on Lumen to catalog and interpret alien cultural traits, he wrote. *Another lonely, silent world. Like me.*

Johnten watched at the window until he nodded off. When he awoke, the dayside of the planet—dawn, he supposed—was flowing under him.

A weird cluster of rocks a kilometer or so away sped from the planet. He had little time to wonder about that, because, just then, the chief Communication Officer blasted across the ship-wide intercom. "There's life on Lumen," Mr. Esang screeched. "We're seeing cities. Aircraft. Unbelievable!"

~

Johnten squeezed into the packed auditorium, taking the only remaining front row seat. Toward the end of landing orientation, Captain Therreal remarked, "It's odd that Lumen's dominant creatures haven't communicated." He glanced down at Johnten. "We shall require your insights after all, Specialist."

"It's a dream fulfilled, sir," he mumbled, hoping he didn't sound stupid.

Mr. Esang was twitching beside Johnten and waved his hand like a schoolboy. Without waiting for permission, Esang jumped up. “Excuse me, sir, nothing *from* Lumen, but the planet is *bombarded* by untranslatable messages. Except there’s one from a female saying in inverted, I mean, reversed English, ‘Please come back. We need you.’”

The Captain’s face knotted in mystified concern, but all he said was, “Thank you, Mr. Esang. Everyone be sure your preclusive inoculations are up-to-date. You’re dismissed.”

~

The transport shuttle’s descent revealed clouds, then low hills covered in a carpet of deciduous-like flora. The scene from Johnten’s window seat appeared as a film negative with antipodal colours. What might be shadow emanated light, and it all incandesced with a lustrous glow. The Captain had selected a field outside a northern coastal village for the landing, and as they neared the ground, Johnten observed a massive throng of inhabitants gathered around the proposed site.

“Do they know we’re coming?” he asked himself.

The other dozen or so Radiants discussed the riddle with their companions.

When the transport settled, it took a minute for Assistant Safety Officer Sanderson to confirm the atmosphere’s analysis. “Real good,” she said at last. “Gas proportions nearly identical to Earth’s, as we predicted.”

The landing party members moved to the transport’s integument door, Johnten clutching his field notebook to his chest.

“Eager today, professor?” Sanderson asked him.

He slowly lowered his notebook to his side. “I’ve told you, Miss Sanderson, I’m not a professor.”

“I know, I know. I’m just messing with you.”

“Oh, okay. You’re teasing. Did you know the term ‘mess’ once referred to the dining hall of a sailing ship?” This seemed to create a natural segue, so he said, “Let’s have lunch sometime.”

Sanderson only grimaced and shook her head.

When the integument door opened, flooding the compartment with the planet's air, everyone stood stock-still and breathed carefully to give one final test to the atmosphere's compatibility with human physiology. Johnten felt a slight dizziness, but Sanderson hyperventilated and passed out cold; an alarm buzzed, the external door slammed shut, the room flushed with Terran air, and medics evacuated Sanderson to a berth where she soon revived.

After a few additional tests for airborne metaviruses, the door was opened again, and the team shuffled down the ramp.

For Johnten the view was like a blazing impressionistic painting of a New England landscape. Figures approached from the crowd. They appeared blurry until they drew near, and he realized with a shock that they were walking in reverse. A person turned to him, and now he saw it was a young woman. She held a baby on her hip, a little girl almost a year old grasping her mother's blouse. The young mother's luminescent skin and garments, and facial features possessing delicate contours no race of Earth ever had, gave her a beauty he never imagined possible.

Her baby. She reminded him of photographs of his own mother when she was a child.

The woman stepped toward Johnten and kissed him lingeringly on the mouth—her lips cool to the touch—and when she stepped back she held a garland of flowers in her free hand. A memory burst into existence, a memory telling him the sweet-smelling lei had hung around his neck only seconds before. How was this happening? She spoke to him in a familiar, bizarre, inverted language.

And as other crewmembers were greeted with similar, albeit less intimate farewells from the indigenous people, Johnten felt himself swept up in astonished awareness that time itself—or perhaps even the physical laws of this newly discovered world in this darkish planetary system—flowed backwards; yet for the visitors from Earth and their artifacts, time moved as usual.

They existed within the same reality and were passing in converse directions—his future being the young woman's

past, and his past being her future.

So the mysterious radio message had been for him.

Johnten's first impulse was to sprint back to the transport and hide in a locker, but for once in his awkward life, when everything was infinitely awkward, he knew what to do. He held his ground and began writing on his field notebook. The young woman lifted the garland to her nose and breathed in. She smiled like gentle sunlight, wiped her eyes, sniffed twice, and nodded with comprehension as droplets leaped from the ground, rolled up her cheeks, and squeezed into her tear ducts.

He finished writing and held up the notebook so she could read his words, *I love you and our baby very, very much. I promise, we will be together again.*

Johnten swapped his notebook for the child who snuggled her face against his chest. Such a brief period ahead to be a father and a husband. And he had no idea how it all would work, but clearly he had already solved certain future problems of cross-cultural interaction—he had a family!

Specialist Johnten slipped his available arm around his wife's waist, and though he nearly stumbled, they walked backwards toward the crowd.

END

The next story tells "Wrong Planet" *from Johnton's first person point of view. And, guess what? He told it to me and I wrote it down. And then I helped him go back/forward to the beginning/end and start/finish what he missed. Sound confusing? You have no idea.* **–MH**

Ships Passing in the Night: Romance and Marriage between Lovers from Anti-synchronous Worlds

An essay by Specialist Estaugh Johnten, as provided by Mickey Hunt

A frozen image of the park's playfield looks somewhat like an ordinary playfield on Earth. Families are sitting on blankets with their picnics, a canine is poised in the air as he clamps his teeth on a flying disk, a woman is jogging down the path between a row of shade trees. Children dash through a play castle with its hanging bridges and polymer towers. All this would look ordinary, except the colors in the image are antipodal, like in an old-fashion film negative. What might be shadow emanates light, and it all incandesces with a lustrous glow.

An expectant crowd has gathered at the edge of a field, and upon closer inspection, you'd see that the postures and faces droop with sadness. They are faces possessing delicate contours no race of Earth ever had.

Even stranger would be watching the film in forward motion, because everything actually moves opposite to what you expect: the people, the leaves on the trees, even the sounds of voices.

I myself am walking backwards, with my arm around the waist of a wife I've never met, and a charming child of mine with her arm wrapped around my neck. My wife is carrying my field notebook. I'm elated, and of course completely bewildered. As we walk in reverse toward the waiting crowd, I nearly stumble, because I can't see where we're going.

Children are playing a game nearby. One girl runs backwards and stoops to leave a small white ball on the ground. As we pass, the ball springs up of its own accord and smacks me in the nose. It hurts…

Welcome to the planet Lumen.

The above scenario describes my personal first minutes after I stepped to the ground of a planet circling the first dark star[1] we've ever discovered and located within a vast region of dark matter. It's a planet, indeed a whole region of space, where physics on its most rudimentary level, and, perhaps even time itself, moves opposite to ours.

Earth Command had engaged me on this exploratory mission for the remote possibility of encountering sentient beings on other worlds. While I have studied astrophysics as a hobby, my true expertise was in anthropology. My job was to catalog and analyze sentient alien cultural practices. Little did anyone guess that I would arrive on this new planet already "knowing" a great deal about life there. It was a knowledge that sprang into existence as events occurred. Of all our team members on the mission, I was the only one who could fully wrap his brain around how things worked. My Earth-based supervisors believe it was my Asperger's Syndrome that enabled me to adapt to the confusing environment. What had isolated me from other people in normal time allowed me to better fit in on Lumen. Plus, I had already developed attitudes and techniques to help me compensate for my misperceptions.

~

When our research ship *Radiant* first approached Lumen, we entered a high, slow orbit above the nightside. The view from my port window showed the surface to be dark, that is, with no lights to indicate any sort of advanced civilization. I wrote in my field notebook, "Another lonely silent sphere, like me." Only when the ship orbited to the dayside of the planet did our scouting telescopes show living beings with a technology similar to 20th century Earth; that is, they had self-propelled transport craft, including flying vessels. As I gazed from the window, a weird cluster of rocks about a kilometer or so from us flew away from the planet. I didn't learn until later that they were meteors falling *toward* the planet.

During Landing Orientation, I arrived late and took the remaining empty seat in the front row. Captain Therreal[2] remarked that it was strange the inhabitants hadn't responded to our attempts to contact them by radio.

At that time, Communications Officer Esang interrupted to shrilly announce that Lumen was being bombarded by messages from space, including one from a woman who cried in inverted English, "Please come back, we need you!" This was all a mystery that we resolved only later.

As we landed the transport shuttle on the surface for the first time ever, Assistant Safety Officer Sanderson was in charge of making one last check to the atmosphere's compatibility with human physiology. The composition of Lumen's air was roughly identical to Earth's, except in the motion of the elements' atoms. Sanderson reported the air was "okay," and as we waited for the transport's integument door to open, she noticed that I was clutching my notebook to my chest.

"Eager today, Professor?" she asked.

Suddenly self-aware and chagrined about looking like a schoolgirl, I nonchalantly lowered the notebook to my side. No matter how many times I corrected her, she always called me professor.

"I'm just messing with you," she said.

Oh. I realized then she was only teasing, but her use of "mess" reminded me of an archaic meaning of the term, that of a sailing ship's dining hall. This seemed like a natural segue, so I asked her if she would join me for dinner sometime.

She only grimaced and shook her head.

I suppose the universe wreaked its revenge when the door opened and flooded the compartment with the native air. Sanderson hyperventilated and passed out cold. The door buzzed and slammed shut, and medics evacuated her to a berth in the shuttle, where she soon recovered. As it turned out, Sanderson never could process Lumen's air, and further research showed that approximately 5.5% of the *Radiant's* crew couldn't. For them, the oxygen was totally inert and unreactive, and they were compelled to wear breathing apparatus and tanks whenever they spent time on the planet, a situation which was a burden. Also, as it turned out, Sanderson grew to respect me, and we became friends. She was a medical

doctor, and I invited her to attend the birth of my daughter, a story I will return to later.

When the landing team shuffled down the ramp, I among them, the scene before us appeared as a blazing impressionistic painting of a New England landscape. Figures approached from the crowd. They appeared blurry until they drew near, and I realized with a shock that they were walking in reverse. A person turned to me, and now I saw it was a young woman. She held a baby on her hip, a little girl almost a year old grasping her mother's blouse. The young mother's luminescent skin, garments, and facial features gave her a certain beauty I never imagined possible.

Her baby. She reminded me of photographs of my own mother when she was a child.

The woman stepped toward me and kissed me lingeringly on the mouth—her lips cool to the touch—and when she stepped back, she held a garland of flowers in her free hand. A memory burst into existence, a memory telling me the sweet-smelling lei had hung around my neck only seconds before. How was this happening? She spoke to me in a familiar, bizarre, inverted language.

As other crewmembers were greeted with similar, albeit less intimate farewells from the indigenous people, I felt myself swept up in astonished awareness that we and they existed within the same reality and were passing in converse directions–my future being the young woman's past, and my past being her future.

So that's when I realized the mysterious radio message had been for me, and the immense throng of people at the landing site had gathered to say goodbye.

My first impulse was to sprint back to the transport and hide in a locker, but for once in my awkward life, when everything was infinitely awkward, I knew what to do. I held my ground and began writing on my field notebook. The young woman lifted the garland to her nose and breathed in. She smiled like gentle sunlight, wiped her eyes, sniffed twice, and nodded with comprehension as droplets leapt from the ground, rolled up her cheeks, and squeezed into her tear ducts.

I finished writing and held up the notebook so she could read my words, I love you and our baby very, very much. I promise, we will be together again.

I swapped my notebook for our child, who snuggled her face against my chest. And I had no idea how it all would work, but clearly, we had already solved certain future problems of cross-cultural interaction—I had a family!

~

Is time real, or was it simply that the physics of Lumen moved backward, even at the quantum level? Is it that subatomic particles like electrons were just spinning in reverse to ours?

Up until we encountered Lumen, what we found there and in the planet's spatial neighborhood would have been described as being composed of Diroc's Antimatter.[3] However, the only antimatter we've known before has been in laboratories. We've never experienced antienergy before, not what was recognized as such. In artificial, simplistic experiments, whenever matter and antimatter touched one another, they annihilated. But the stable presence within our galaxy of antispace and all it contains, and our safe interaction with Lumen, proves that matter and natural antimatter coexist, which brought up the possibility that our previous theories have been all wrong.

Dr. Pachero-Nanez, the first scientist to clarify and popularize the idea that time was not real, claimed that time is only a human construct that measures relative rates of change. Pachero-Nanez helped us understand that Einstein's theory of relativity wasn't as profound as once thought, because it only meant that time seems to flow differently because of an observer's relative *position* to the light by which we perceive events. That is true, but our experience on Lumen proved Pachero-Nanez wrong about the existence of time itself.[4]

Why? Because my life with Ahtebazille existed before it had even happened from my perspective, we learned that time itself was a singular entity of its own. Time is real. And yet what happened was completely dependent on our decisions in that moving present that we shared together, a present

something like the juncture of two streams when they form a river. The streams merge, mixing and churning, and continue on with both changed.

Events occurring in that present changed my past and created their own memories. As I already wrote, when Ahtebazille greeted me, she hung a lei around my neck as a parting gift. Until she took that action, it never happened for me, but when it happened, that lei continued to be around my neck in her future and in my past, and that's why I remembered it.

My two and a half years on Lumen was full of such experiences, but the confusion and the continuous reshaping of my memory were only part of the difficulty.

~

Most people of Lumen were sad when we arrived, and sadness often pervaded my mood as well, because I knew I had such a brief period ahead to be a father and a husband. Our daughter Atte'eerneh was growing younger each day, and in a few months her contraction of size and abilities alarmed and grieved me. I knew what the inevitable would be. It was exactly like having a child with a terminal illness, but there was no treatment, cure, or hope of recovery. Her birth then was like a death, or at least a vanishing. I saw her slip into her mother's body, and then observed as Ahtebazille's belly shrank month by month, and I couldn't forget our daughter as she had been: happy, scampering around our house (backwards of course), playing with dolls and singing nonsense songs. I was so sorrowful in thinking that I couldn't know her at a period later in her life. Adding to the sorrow, when I arrived on Lumen, Ahtebazille was pregnant with our second child, a boy.

I had to force myself to not think about this.

~

For an example of a milder difficulty, as it turned out, arriving late to social events was essential on Lumen. In fact, to be early you had to arrive after an occasion was completely over, or you would be too late. By the time of Ahtebazille's and my wedding, I had it figured out. Because, of course, from

my point of view, the wedding ceremony began at the end and worked backwards to the beginning. In fact, our last ever "connubial celebration" took place on the night *before* the wedding.

Whenever I speak at holo-seminars and conferences, the questions most frequently asked are about sex. Everyone wants to know how to "make a baby" on Lumen. I've written about it in impersonal clinical detail in my paper "From Coitus to Foreplay: Sexual Relations Between Intraspecies Partners of Reverse Time Ecosystems,"[5] but it's enough to say in this present article that the process is far easier than one might imagine. As I have understood from the wide study of cultures, intimate relations between the opposite sexes are fraught with awkwardness, blunders, embarrassment, misunderstandings, and even humor, obstacles often easily overcome in a loving relationship. When the respective time streams of the partners are opposed, those factors are compounded. But as with everything on Lumen, I was always surprised how well it worked out when we just relaxed and let what might happen, happen.

~

The same as with our daughter undeveloping until the point of when her life began at fertilization, so my relationship with my wife Ahtebazille diminished over time. I knew her better, but she knew me less. She seemed to have forgotten my favorite foods. Her cooking deteriorated. After the year and more of enjoying our marriage bed, the strictly enforced chastity was a sore trial for me. Her parents stopped liking me, saying that a close relationship between their daughter and me was impossible. She comprehended what I said less.[6] Beyond when we first met (from her point of view) one evening at a square dance, I was a stranger to her, but I knew her better than ever, the situation being a mirror to when I arrived and first saw her. So, as we knew it would, my wife didn't know me anymore. Think of it like severe Alzheimer's, except she was young and healthy in every way, making the "memory loss" all the more painful.

~

Though we had been among the Lumens for a long while, they acted cold, cautious, and afraid, as if we had just arrived. When we actually had arrived, we were clumsy. Now they were, and you had to be on a continuous lookout for unexpected hazards, like being run over while crossing the street.[7] I myself was nearly killed by an ice cream truck roaring at high speed in reverse around a corner.

So, there was no longer any joy in staying, and after 30 full months of living on the planet, deeply involved in the affairs of its people, we lifted off for the last time, with me feeling even more alone than I have in my whole life.

~

That was eight months ago, and soon after my arrival on Earth, I ran into my old friend Mickey Hunt[8] at my favorite tea cafe. Mickey had been an obscure social reformer back in the 21st century and took up writing faux science fiction and fantasy in his retirement. I say faux, because the science and fantasy were really real. Captain Therreal had run across an actual copy of Mickey's early novel in a museum and went back to meet him. Therreal ended up inviting him on a time transcendence journey, but now after extensively roaming across Earth's eras, Mickey planned to return home to his own time. When he heard about my family on Lumen, and my heartbreak over how empty my current life was, he asked me to join him aboard the UNSS *Chariot* for the acceleration to light speed, a voyage that would last a whole year. He said he'd make room for me in his quarters.

"Really, you'd take me along?" I said. "Only a select few go on these expeditions."

"You'll be my guest," he said. "Here's what you do: when we break the light barrier, we leave the material-energy-chronos universe and enter what's called eternity. You know, 'God is light.' It's like dying, except you're not dead. It's being totally awake. In the dream world, your powers of thought and action are limited. Your mind floats along, flitting here and there, and you have negligible control over imaginary actions within the dream. Your body is all but immobile and paralyzed in bed. Consider that the supernatural world is to the

natural world what the waking world is to the dream world. In the supernatural, you have incomparably more freedom and control over your mind and body than you do in your ordinary existence. You can go anywhere and anywhen you like." He paused to let this sink in, and then repeated, "Anywhere and when. It's the only way to travel anymore. Time and space transcendence."

A warm flush suffused my whole being, and the gloomy cloud that enveloped my head vanished entirely. I pulled out my field notebook and began scribbling my packing list.

Mickey said, "Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

I told him what, and that's my plan for the future.

Calculating my life expectancy, I intend to arrive back on Lumen so that I might possibly live until a few months *before* I arrived the first time. That will give me another 40-50 years with Ahtebazille and my children.

"Don't forget the grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on," Mickey said. "You may be surprised at the multitude of descendants you have. I was when I peeked ahead, and knowing about them is why I never feel lonesome."

My enthusiasm suddenly fell away, and I closed my notebook. "I just thought of it. When I rejoin my wife, for her it will be parting all over again. She'll be old, maybe even dead."

"Can't be helped," Mickey said. "You've got to go."

He's right. And I will go.

END NOTES:

[1] A dark star is a black hole in particular effects, but much lower in mass.

[2] This is the same Therreal who commanded the starship *Chariot* in the first intentional time-transcendence excursions based on the theories of Nobel Prize-winning propulsionist, Dr. Pachero-Nanez, who discovered that as a vessel neared the speed of light, its mass decreased, enabling it to break the light barrier and escape the limitations of the material-energy-chronos universe.

[3] Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac, 8 August 1902–20 October 1984.
[4] Pachero-Nanez was wrong in other things as well, namely his National Socialist politics.
[5] Originally published in the *Journal of Chaotic Terrain*, Vol. 3849, Issue 3, Year Indeterminate.
[6] I had taught her English and I, in turn, had to learn to speak and understand it backwards.
[7] I never quite learned to safely drive on Lumen.
[8] Not his real name.

END

Estaugh A. Johnten grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania and earned a B.A. in Social/Cultural Anthropology at Templetown University. He received a Fulhaus/DAD Fellowship for the Eberhard-Hostleter-Universität in Tübingen, Germany, where he subsequently completed an M.A. His work with the extraordinary voyage of the USS *Radiant* was funded through a grant from the International Academies of Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering. When defending his Ph.D. dissertation at Hahvad University just prior to his departure from regular time, he told the examination committee to "Jump in the lake."

Mickey Hunt explores the universe from his base in Asheville, North Carolina. His reports disguised as fiction have appeared in the *Literary Hatchet*, *AntipodeanSF*, the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, the *Dark Mountain* anthology, and elsewhere. Readers may learn more at **chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com**.

The biographical information on the previous page that appears after ***END*** *is part of* **"Ships Passing"** *and so it's included. Children was one of the story's themes, as it is with the next story, a spin on a familiar yarn.* **–MH**

The Gingerbread Puppet Boy

The wrinkled old man sat patiently beside his luggage in the bus station and stared toward the glass door at the far end of the waiting room. *What was this madness?* he wondered. It had all started so innocently. He chuckled softly to himself . . .

His wife had wanted a son, plain and simple. But the doctor had told them even before they were married years ago this was impossible. She would be barren.

At first, she hadn't minded so much. She had somehow gotten comfort from their puppetry business. Making the puppets, writing plays, and designing and sewing costumes used a lot of creative energy. Also, the uncanny lifelike quality of the puppets in performance and the joyful laughter of the children satisfied some of her maternal instincts. But it never really was enough . . .

Outside the bus station, up and down Main Street, all the townspeople and half the county had collected. Apparently, the tension was too much for these factory workers and part-time farmers because a fistfight broke out. A fresh-faced boy pressed his nose up against the glass door of the waiting room, peering inside. His eyes lit up when he saw the old man. "Hey everybody!" he piped. "The racer's father is in here. I saw him on the news yesterday!"

The fistfight abruptly stopped, and the crowd that had been watching it surged through the door, eager to be nearer to the source of the irritation and excitement. A great, fat man charged through to the front. He might have been one of the fighters because he was sweaty and covered with dust. "I hear you're a relation of this troublemaker!" he said loudly as his jowls shook.

"Well, you might say I am," the old man answered.

"What did he say?" shouted two or three who were jammed up against the wall of the newly stuffed waiting room.

"He says he is a relation!" boomed the fat man.

Startled, someone backed away from the fat man and tripped. "Please, be careful of my luggage," the old man said and pulled a rather large, long box with air holes in it closer to him.

"What I want to know," the fat man demanded, "is who will pay for my broken fence and my lost cows that ran after this son of yours? And my boys took the pickup truck and have been gone for days."

"And your kid stole my car!" a voice bellowed from the wall.

"My daughter!" a woman cried, and fainted into her husband's arms.

A businessman shoved forward. "All the workmen at my factory ran off as well. Nobody has worked a single hour since that fellow challenged them all to a race. He said nobody could catch him."

"What have you to say for yourself?" the fat man bellowed as he shook his finger at the old man.

"I can't be blamed for him," the old man replied. "He will have to take responsibility for his own actions, I suppose. Take him to the courthouse like you would anyone else, but . . . you'll have to catch him first." Here the old man looked at his box and smiled.

"That," the businessman said, "is what every Joe Baloney and Jane Salami has been trying to do! Haven't you seen the news? The whole country is crazy." The businessman scratched his head. "I just don't understand it."

The old man said, "But you can't blame him for folks chasing him. They could have just ignored him."

"Sure we can blame him!" retorted the businessman. "He trespassed on my property, and then brashly claimed nobody could catch him. So, all my workers tried right then, and most are still trying as far as I know. Just imagine 75 men running off as fast as they could go, and for some, that wasn't very fast." He was looking at the fat man.

The businessman seemed suddenly struck with the humor of the improbable situation and grinned. "As fast as they could

go," he repeated, his voice starting to squeak. Then he burst into laughter.

The fat man joined in, too, as he remembered himself running and then later seeing his matronly cows tossing their heads and kicking up their heels like young heifers as they gamboled after the lanky and awkward, but incredibly fast young man. The brash fellow had called out to his herd, "My mama couldn't catch me, the workers couldn't catch me, and YOU CAN'T EITHER!" The fat man's laughter was as infective as his anger, and soon the whole crowd in the waiting room was in howling stitches.

The old man saw his chance and hoisted up the box, hugging it as he pushed through the hysterical people and out the door. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes or more before the bus was due. He sat down on the bench and recollected the musings he had before the crowd interrupted…

Everything had turned out so unexpectedly. His wife seemed content having no children until they fully retired about a year before. Then she began yearning for a real family. It was just a month ago when he had an idea. He would build the best puppet he had ever made. Maybe that would please her, he had thought.

The old puppeteer had worked long hours. They were too old for a baby, he decided, so he made the puppet boy 20 years old and life-sized. The puppet was created from a very special gingerbread, and the pieces were baked hard and fastened together by the clip hooks and metal rings set into them. The puppeteer specially made him with movable eyes and a mouth on a head that turned every which way, just like a real one. The puppet boy was a rod puppet. Each of his limbs had a thin, wooden, black-painted rod attached, and with three puppeteers operating him at once, he would be quite realistic.

The puppeteer's wife sewed the clothes: a blue, green and yellow flannel shirt, brown corduroy pants, a red neckerchief, and a green hat. The puppeteer and his wife had been very busy and very happy.

One evening last week, they finished painting him and went to bed to let him dry overnight. The old woman must

have yearned and prayed very hard for a son before she dropped off to sleep because the next morning, something terribly unusual happened that started this whole mess…

The laughter inside the station faded, and the scuffling and shouting started up again. These practical people wouldn't forget their troubles so easily, the old man thought. He pulled out binoculars and looked intently down the road from where the bus was to come. The last report on the radio said that the racer had hijacked a Greyhound bus and was headed in this direction. He had already broken through at least one police blockade. Up and down the street, hundreds and hundreds of adults and children were lined up as for a parade. Some held umbrellas to shade the sun. Balloons floated high up in the sky. At the far end of the street, another police blockade stood by.

"Sure to fail like all the rest," he murmured and winked at his luggage.

The old man warmly remembered that morning when life began again. He and his wife woke up with sunshine streaming into the window on them in bed. The first thing they did, even before breakfast, was to dress their new puppet boy. The last thing to put on him was the red neckerchief. Just as the old woman knotted it around his neck, the puppet boy's head jerked up, he blinked his eyes, lifted himself from his stand which then fell over, and he ran out the door pulling off the wooden rods and calling out behind, "You can't catch me!" The old man had been following him the last few days like everyone else, but not before he had made some preparations…

Some of the people waiting for the fun craned their necks to look down the street. "Here it comes!" the fresh-faced kid piped out. The local marching band struck up a lively tune.

The crowd in the waiting room tumbled outside. The old man could barely make out the Greyhound way down the road and moving at high speed. He bent over, loosened the fastenings, and lifted the lid of the box.

"Okay," he whispered, "you can get out now. Nobody will notice."

The beautiful young puppet girl sat up and shook her long thick red hair. She stepped out of the box with a clumsy gracefulness and began some quick stretching exercises in her green running suit with yellow stripes all the way down to her running shoes.

She flashed her brown eyes at the old puppeteer. “Will he be on the bus?”

“I think so,” the old man replied. “Look!”

The bus was getting nearer. Behind it, also racing madly, followed a number of police cars, blue lights flashing, a pickup truck, motorbikes, a coal truck, and other assorted vehicles. A helicopter swooped overhead. People cheered from the windows and rooftops along the street. The bus entered the town and suddenly braked. The cars right behind screeched to avoid back-ending it. The police at the barricade were ready. But right in front of the bus station, an emergency door flew open and out jumped the colorfully clad puppet boy who rolled and tumbled to his feet. The whole crowd was silent and tense with expectancy. The boy gazed for a moment at the puppet girl, then shouted a challenge to everyone within earshot.

“Nobody has caught me yet, and not one of you can either!!!”

Every single soul that heard these words thought at that moment of just one thing: to catch this impudent rascal. A roar, like when a goal is scored at a big soccer game, exploded from the hundreds of throats, and as one huge mass, they were after him.

The old man joined the slow pokes trailing behind the pack. He walked just outside of town and watched the runners swarming across a large field. Through his binoculars he saw the puppet boy way ahead of everyone, but a green-clad figure was moving up on him fast, her red hair blowing straight back.

Running, running, she was right behind him now. The puppet boy glanced over his shoulder, and she made a flying tackle. They skidded together across the grassy ground.

He was caught!

The wrinkled old puppeteer chuckled to himself. His wife would be happy. They were too old now to have children, that was sure. Too much chasing around.

But grandchildren would be nice.

END

I wrote that story way back in college. Those cookie figures above are our Christmas tree decorations. Next: we are more like the creepy crawly creatures than we think. **–MH**

Skirmishing for Food

Matt limped to the kitchen sink, filled a glass with water, and drank it down.

He slid the window curtains open, and a tiny speck streaking between the crusty, smeary dishes caught his eye. The speck was but one ant in an endless string of frenetic two-way activity. Ants met each other head-on, paused to visit, and rushed away. Matt reached out to squish the foragers, to rub them into a film of reeking, acrid fear when thumping sounds from the back steps diverted him.

The door opened.

"Julie!" he said. He gazed with trembling enthusiasm at the lumpy plastic bags hanging from each of her hands.

She plunked them onto the floor. "Incredible. Three decent cauliflower heads, 40 pounds of sprouted sweet potatoes strapped on my bicycle, a dozen mushy organic bell peppers, bagels, and hey, look at this." She fished in a bag and held up a grey triangular block.

"Oh, my gosh," Matt said. "Cheese!"

"*Parmigiano Reggiano*."

Matt sniffed the block and smiled.

"It's rock hard, but basically edible."

"Yay. We are feasting this morning. You know I would have gone with you if I hadn't been warned last week. Next time I might be arrested."

"You mean if you hadn't sprained your ankle and called an ambulance. When I was inside the dumpster at O'Tingles, a police cruiser glided around the corner, and I didn't duck fast enough. He flashed his beam, rolled down his window, and said, 'I'm aware you're in there. Be careful.' And then he left."

"He left?"

"Right."

"Nice."

"Hey, clear a spot. I need to rinse the plunder."

Matt shifted stacks of dishes while Julie glared at the insects crawling across the counter or dashing for cover. "Piss ants, again," she said fervently. "Destroy them. I want you to, now. That's *your* job."

Breathing slowly through his mouth, he watched the busy raiders. He could taste the garbage can odor still clinging to Julie's clothing. Inside one bowl, a hundred minuscule ants had circled the dried dal bhat remnants. He moaned to himself. "They're harmless, really. It's good sharing our space with these creatures."

"So, you won't kill them?"

"No, I won't. They have a unique place in the cosmos."

"And what's that?"

"They, they clean up."

"They clean up?" She sighed. "At least wash the stupid dishes, okay?"

"Fine, fine. You take a shower. Then I'll give you a hug, and we'll cook breakfast."

END

Next, a personal, fictionalized, partly autobiographical story. Hope you won't mind. **–MH**

Arrangements

David Welch, Sr. arranged flowers, but right away you've probably adopted a wrong impression about him, because he nearly made the art form into a masculine sport. As with the great chefs and composers of the world, most of the top floral designers are men. I suppose his regular work lent masculinity to his love for color, pattern, balance, theme—all those elements contributing to a finished arrangement. And his were not just "arrangements"—the masses of flowers you see at weddings or funerals—rather, they portrayed natural environments and worlds in themselves reflecting an idealization of life. He was a landscaper and a retail nursery owner—had been all of his adult life.

He didn't actually begin flower arranging until his wife died four years ago. That's when he ordered several boxes of flowers and made the funeral displays himself, weeping off and on. Those displays were simple like what you usually see, he being a beginner, though they served general expectations well enough.

Funeral flowers… never help the bereaved… They're mere thoughts, symbols of sympathy and consolation, and not real in themselves.

Hannah is real. She emanates a beauty that catches your eye, yes, but becomes even more apparent and satisfying the more you watch her, the more you get to know her. A complicated beauty and intelligence that might intimidate most men, the beauty of a talented movie star when she isn't made up and glamorized. Hannah was a friend of David's daughter, Olivia, was the same age as her, and she worked at the nursery in the summers, the Bluestone Nursery and Landscaping. Hannah had been pursuing a horticultural degree at North Carolina State University, and when she graduated, she came on board as a manager.

~

Before long, David wanted Hannah to be in charge of opening a flower shop to be associated with the retail nursery. Their story begins early one morning when she came charging into his office.

"I really don't want this new job," she said. "I don't see any meaning in it. I've told you my goal is to grow native plants and restore people's rural property to a natural state—weeding out their exotic-invasives."

Her ambition, as is obvious to anyone who knew about the place then, contradicted Bluestone's universe, because the nursery sold some of those horrible, noxious, foreign invaders, and installed them in customers' landscapes.

"We have to diversify," David said. "People still get married and die, even if they don't have money. They die, anyway. And they all—"

"Need flowers," she finished for him. "Diversify. That's my idea. Get rid of your *Euonymus alatus*—they're spreading all over the woods around here. People should turn their yards into food-producing gardens. The flower shop is a direct step away from what I want to do."

Hannah is passionate about these things, but she was really thinking that people still get married, just not her.

David mused before he spoke again. Hannah stood in place, shifting her weight from foot to foot, uncertain about what the day ahead would hold, uncertain of her job. Finally, David said, "I thought you were agreeable to the flower shop."

"I'm not. I didn't know how to tell you."

"Alright. Alright. I can find someone else. It'll take a while. I'm disappointed, because this will delay starting. I was actually, uh, going to become involved in the shop myself. Not running it, but I was thinking of teaching a flower arranging class—"

"Uh huh. Umm, do you want me on my regular job today, because if so, the store is about to open. I need to unload a truck."

"—more along the lines of Japanese flower arranging."

"Really?" This got her attention and put the truck out of

mind. “That’s what I like.” She now took a chair. “I never made time to learn Ikebana. We just touched on it in a horticulture class. What school do you follow?”

“I learned from books and the internet. I suppose I have my own style. I’d like to do some formal study and learn the traditional approaches.”

“Why don’t you?”

“My philosophy is about how plants and rocks should be placed as they appear in nature, in relationship to each other—I don’t use any man-made materials or cultivated varieties, usually. The arrangement should draw the observer into the creation. And the artist should be invisible, as if the flowers, branches, and stones were tossed into place, but still are perfect for each other.”

“That’s what I think,” she said, but she was also thinking, *You should apply this philosophy to the rest of your business*.

“I have been listening to you,” he said as a gentle remonstrance. “What about unloading the truck now? We have employees waiting for instructions.”

“Oh my gosh,” she said and ran out of the office.

~

Hannah did take the job of opening the flower shop for Bluestone Nursery, and David did a formal study when, during the following winter, he flew to Japan and attended an Ikebana school for three weeks. When he returned he started teaching classes, and Hannah was among his first students. They sold quite a few arrangements, and David entered some of his best into the local county fair. Surprisingly, his style caught on, partly due to the photographs Hannah made, and in time he gained a reputation as a master, though he didn’t feel he deserved the acclaim. Sometimes he was invited to speak around the state, and this enhanced his nursery business, especially when a prominent regional newspaper ran a feature story on him.

Late one afternoon, David came to the flower shop, a separate building along the busy road that the retail nursery was situated on. David’s shop didn’t smell chemically like some florist shops do, but was more like a fresh meadow.

Hannah was staring into a glass-walled refrigerator with a clipboard in hand. Her dark hair was arranged—it wasn't arranged, it fell in natural folds onto her shoulders and neck as it often does, and she has a way of absent-mindedly brushing it from her face. I'm sure there was a stray leaf in her hair.

An employee was sweeping up in the back workroom.

"Excuse me, Hannah," David said. "May I ask you a question?" He wouldn't have picked the leaf from her hair.

"Sure. Just a second." She finished scribbling on her clipboard—the flower orders for the next week—while David wandered into her office.

In a minute she came in and dropped into her chair with a sigh. "What can I do for you?"

"The International Ikebana Society asked me to speak, and do a demonstration arrangement at their annual convention."

"Great. Where is it?"

"Tokyo. I don't really want to go."

"Why not?"

"I already went to Japan once. It's enough. Tokyo is a big city and I don't like cities. It's in May, which is our busiest month."

"I'd go, if I were you. I'm sure we'll survive here. You could get out of the city and look around."

"It's not the same traveling alone." David paused here a moment and then rolled along with, "I want to ask if you will go with me. I'd cover all expenses—I'll take a business deduction. They have cultural programs you could take, things like bamboo craft, silk corsages, things to add to our offerings at the shop."

"Why me?" she asked as if he had not explained enough already.

Still sweeping, the employee passed outside her office door.

"Ah, to help collect native materials for my arrangement," David said. "It might not be easy in Tokyo."

Hannah bit her lower lip, thinking. "Separate rooms in the hotel, right?"

David gasped. “Yes! Yes! Of course. I’m shocked you felt you had to ask.”

“I didn’t have to ask. But half the people here think you and I are having an affair.”

“Oh.” David was sobered.

“It’s not your fault. Not your fault. You’ve not done or said anything improper. The more I deny it, the more everyone disbelieves me. It’s because I don’t have a boyfriend, and you, you’re fit and trim for your age.” She was remembering him mowing the lawn while shirtless—pushing a mower—at the store after hours.

“I’m flattered, because I’m getting to be the old man. But no boyfriend? I didn’t know. I don’t understand. What’s wrong with young men?”

“I—” Hannah stopped.

“Men have become emasculated,” David said, filling the silence. “They’re afraid to take risks and assume responsibilities. I have a friend in Oregon who always said he wanted to start a school for single men 25 and older, an outdoor school to teach them how to be men.”

“Olivia mentioned him.”

“The graduation exercise was to be two weeks backpacking in Alaska wilderness. They’d be dropped off by air taxi. Then they’d receive a certificate of eligibility.”

“Where are all the graduates?” Hannah’s voice was remote, withdrawn.

“He never did it—the school. It was only a dream of his. I was thinking… it’s a personal question, but—have you ever had any… eligible men in your life?”

No doubt, David didn’t understand right away why Hannah broke down and cried—he had never seen her do this before. She talked through the tears without a break. “I have a few friends, but they don’t really care about me as a woman. Only friends. You might not believe this, but I’ve never been kissed by a guy, never. They never call me, I have to call them and half the time they’re never available. I have a problem letting my feelings be known. Maybe I’m giving the wrong signals. I’ll be 28 next year.”

"Hmm." David waited a while before saying gently, "You are an independent creature, but you're not the problem. If I were a younger man, it wouldn't be a problem for me. I aimed for the best, no matter how inaccessible. I tell my sons to do the same." Here, David halted for an inexplicable reason, inexplicable at the time, and then he continued. "Someday I'll tell you how I courted my wife, Marcia."

"Let me think about it, about the trip to Japan," Hannah said.

"Sounds fair enough."

~

She went with him to Japan. On the long series of flights, he was careful not to touch her and she not to touch him, and they were successful until they both fell asleep at the same time, which happened more than once. When he awoke first, he probably eased away and when she awoke first, she didn't. Neither was very embarrassed. They didn't talk much. Being so close physically pushed them apart in other ways. But at some point she asked him, "Are you disappointed because none of your children want to take over the nursery business?"

"They had their fill of it when they were young. They'll probably sell it when I'm gone. Maybe you'll buy it someday." David looked at her and smiled.

"If I could afford it. The Bluestone… Olivia told me about the name. You were working at a rhododendron nursery in college, in the summer."

"I'm not positive it was a star sapphire, but it was beautiful." David gazed through the airplane's window, remembering. "They do find gem-quality corundum in north Georgia. It was huge, the size of two fists."

"But you gave it to the nursery owner?"

"Yep. It might have been worth a lot of money."

"You gave it away."

"But if I kept it my life would be different. I like my life as it is."

"You have three children."

"Three and four grandchildren… five, I mean. My son

Calvin Joel and his wife have the four. Olivia and her husband are expecting their first."

"I know. You have another son? Nobody talks about him."

"He's been a wanderer, but he's done with wandering now."

David abruptly changed the subject by saying, "Besides what I've told you before, there's another reason why I wanted you to come with me. Most of the attendees are women, older women from the U.S. and Scandinavia, as you'll see. Having you there will keep them off of me. I can't stand their flirting. It's obnoxious."

Hannah showed pain on her face, but only said, "You're wearing your wedding ring."

"It doesn't always work."

~

Nothing terribly spectacular happened during the Ikebana convention. Hannah and David often pursued different paths during the day and met for a late restaurant dinner. They spent a whole day together collecting materials for his demonstration arrangement, intending to acquire the bulk of it surreptitiously, clipping from parks, open spaces, or commercial landscapes, and purchasing the rest from shops.

On one foraging stroll through a neighborhood, they found that practically every square foot of outside ground was trimmed and groomed. As they were about to make their first illicit cut, an old Japanese man stepped up to them and shook his head. None of them knew enough language to communicate nuances, but when Hannah showed the man her convention ID tag, he frowned, bowed slightly, and said in heavily accented English, "Flower arrangement, flower arrangement." He pulled clippers from his jacket and motioned for them to follow. As they walked along the sidewalk adjacent to private homes, he stopped now and then to study some flowers or foliage. Occasionally, he clipped something off and handed the results to Hannah. She placed them all into a duffel bag containing damp towels. There were some particularly fine pine branches.

After a bit, a young girl left a house and spoke to the old

man in Japanese, then nodded to David and Hannah and said, "Hello. You are Americans? Mr. Masayuki is a gardener for this neighborhood. He has permission. We wish for you good luck at your convention and hope you enjoy Japan."

Nothing spectacular or out of the ordinary took place except for one evening—the evening set apart for designing the special arrangement.

David's hotel room was a mess, what with enclaves of sorted geologic and classified plant material, the latter in buckets of water. Leaves and clippings strewn all over the floor and furniture. Hannah brought in a bottle of wine. David was already working at a wooden table the hotel had moved into the room. They would have dinner brought to them later. David talked through his ideas and placed and replaced material in the primary container. From time to time he would undo everything and start over. He was having difficulty finding perfection. It seemed his expectation had risen higher than what was possible in this world, as if the whole concept of flower arranging had fallen short. Once in a while, individual visitors—or a clutch of giddy women—from the convention would drop by to see the progress.

One lady who had been scowling at Hannah said, "So, Mr. Welsh, you plan to recreate your design tomorrow before an audience?"

"And narrate the process, and his thinking," Hannah replied.

Visitors hadn't been invited and knew conversation was unwelcome, so after their furtive, admiring looks at David, they never stayed long.

Dinner arrived all under stainless steel domes. The city was growing dark in the windows. Hannah had been taking photographs and said little, until, seeing that David's mental block had finally immobilized him, she whispered, "We should break."

There wasn't much for them to discuss during the meal, unless they were to open a new subject, or an unfinished subject, which Hannah did.

"You said you might tell me how you courted your wife. I'd like to hear about that."

David assumed a blank look as if this was the furthest thing from his mind.

"You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to," Hannah said.

"No, it's okay. I need to clear my head."

"What was she like, before her stroke?"

"She was… a lot like you." David looked at her closely. "Feisty."

Hannah glanced away. "I don't mean to be."

"Marcia and I met in college. She was a freshman and I a junior. We were only friends during those two years, and when she had a boyfriend, or I a girlfriend, it was always someone else. None of those romantic college relationships lasted long. When I graduated, I did some overseas work with a service organization, and by the time I returned to the United States, she had moved back to California, and I went to graduate school—in business. I was talking with a Taiwanese friend about women, you know—he was married and wanted to know why I wasn't—and Marcia was on the list we made of interesting girls I had known. It was a short list. I wasn't in contact with any of them, and my friend suggested I seek them out. Marcia was the only one who wrote back.

"We started corresponding, and after some months I flew out to California to propose. She hadn't told me she had a steady boyfriend, but he wasn't ready to commit—had not been ready for far too long—and she accepted my marriage proposal on the spot."

"That's crazy."

"But it's a crazy world."

"It's easier for men," Hannah said. "If women take the initiative, decent men think they're forward, or loose. And men don't initiate. Olivia told me about a guy who said he'd take care of her, but he would never call her. He expected her to call him. She said, 'You want to marry me, but you won't call me on the phone?'"

"I heard the story."

"She eventually proposed to him."

"My suggestion, and he turned her down." David shook his head. "She has a good husband now."

"He's younger than she is," Hannah said, pouring some wine. "Will you ever marry again?"

"I hate traveling alone, but living alone isn't too bad, in our house. I'd rather have Marcia. Marcia before the stroke…"

"You lost her years before she died."

"The best part of her."

"It's not good to be alone," Hannah said as a platitude.

"I read about how after World War I in Europe, so many young men had been killed that it produced a demographic vacuum. Women who would have gotten married and who were raised to be wives and mothers became old maids. It was the war. We are in the same situation now." He put down his chopsticks.

"Not because of the wars, but because of the culture."

"Yeah," David said to begin a long silence, then, "I'm ready to work now."

Hannah, who had drunk more than her half of the bottle of wine, yawned.

This time Hannah forgot her camera, stood next to him, and offered remarks and critiques, even placing material to illustrate her thoughts. In less than an hour, they were done. They stood back to admire the natural perfection in miniature they had created.

"Will I be able to make it again fresh tomorrow?" he asked.

"It will… be better."

It seemed perfectly natural when, as they stood side-by-side, Hannah wrapped her arm around his, sided up to him, and leaned her head on his shoulder. She yawned again, sleepily.

He put his hand on hers and she turned to face him. He restored her arm in his and walked her to the door of his room and into the hallway. When they reached her door, he said, "Where's your key?"

When he had her key, he opened the door and she stepped inside and turned around.

He stood his ground.

"Are you coming in?" Then, seeing his dismay, in a panic she said, "To talk, I mean. I could make us tea. My room isn't trashed like yours is."

"You're like Ruth," he said. "But I'm not Boaz. You're a dear girl. Goodnight, Hannah."

Hannah was so tired that she didn't feel anything specific then about David's reaction to her romantic invitation, if invitation it was, since she herself wasn't sure. She wasn't sure until morning when her mind was awake. She was attracted to him—loved him, actually—and her womanly instincts had taken over. Ruth, Boaz? In her hotel room, she found the story on the internet, a complex story, but basically about a young widow who had offered herself to a noble older man who took her as his wife.

Hannah cried then for a long while in her room.

~

David, Sr. was not Boaz. It seemed clear enough. He never discussed the incident with her, never even mentioned it again, not on the airplane trip home, nor at the nursery or the flower shop, and until he passed away from an unsuspected heart ailment two months later, he treated Hannah the same as before, as a friend, a fellow artist, and a valuable employee.

In the evening before the funeral, Hannah climbed the hill behind the nursery and sat there alone. The hill is mostly pasture with a few oak trees. She looked down at the buildings, the greenhouses, and the precise arrangements of trees and shrubs in containers and balled-and-burlapped in the heeling-in beds. The broad beds of brilliant color and the empty parking lot in front. The flower shop at the corner of the property. All this the hub of the life's work of an older man she had grown to love. These moments on the hill with the sun sinking below the horizon behind her was her parting, her grieving. She believed she would never meet anyone else like him.

~

His death brought me home, home for the first time in years. It was comforting to be back in the town where I grew up. His death and the funeral were my graduation from a long, painful schooling in life. The music of the ceremony and the meaning of the flowers overwhelmed me with joy. I spoke at the funeral, and it was my valedictorian address. I wasn't convinced if I should talk about such things at a memorial, or if I could get through without breaking down, but death brings out honesty and humility; it destroys illusions; a seed must die as a seed before it can grow into the plant it's meant to be.

During my speech, I heard murmuring in the audience and two or three people walked out; it's a touchy issue and people are touchy.

I told the five to six hundred people in the church that I had lived as a gay man for a dozen years, and that only recently I had renounced this life and pledged to seek what God and nature intended for me: to be a husband and father, even at my age of 34, if I ever met the right woman. I told about how my own dad, David, Sr. had never shied from telling me the truth, never made it easy to rebel, never conceded to my confusion, never acted as if certain relationships I had were normal, never hated me, and never gave up on me. I talked about being raised in our family, and how Dad taught us to work and gave us a love for plants leading me to an advanced degree in botany, to satisfying research, and a university teaching position in Virginia. I thanked him one last time for who he was.

After the ceremony, there was a reception—a long, wide line of people to greet. Most of them didn't know me, and I stood by myself much of the time. A few polite nods. My sister and brother and their families received all the attention. Those who knew me had known me as a child, and were perhaps uncomfortable talking with the dubious, grieving grown man. But there was a young woman who came right up without waiting in line. She was wearing an elegant black dress and a purple orchid corsage.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Hannah. I worked for your dad."

“Hannah, glad to meet you. I’m David—David, Junior. You gathered as much from my speech. I heard you made the fantastic flower arrangement on the altar. Until you walked up to me, I’ve never seen anything more amazing, so lovely.”

“David, Junior,” she said, flushing. “You look a lot like him. Your dad and sister referred to you sometimes, but I never heard your name before this moment.”

“Not surprising, but I’m here now. Dad had been trying to get me to visit since his last Japan trip. I think he’d be proud of me today. He knew of the changes happening in my life.”

“You gave a brave eulogy. Since his last Japan trip, you say?” She seemed to glow even more. “I *know* he would be proud and happy.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he’s been thinking about you more than you realize. Umm, remember how the Bluestone Nursery got its name?”

“I’m sure Dad told us, but I’ve forgotten.”

“The star sapphire he found in north Georgia, the one he gave away.”

“Oh, yeah. Now, I remember. How does—?”

“But I’m wondering, do you like landscaping with edible and native plants?”

“Dear girl, it’s my specialty,” I said with a foolish grin. “How did you know? Hey, when we’re done here, let’s talk someplace. What, what are you doing this evening? What’s absolutely the finest locally owned restaurant in town? My treat.”

~

The epilogue to this story, as if I needed to explain, is that Hannah and I married, and I quit my job at the university to run Bluestone Nursery and Landscaping with her.

END

The next story takes a turn from the "warm humor"
of the others here, because, though it is often light-hearted,
it deals with a type of violence, and how victims of it have
found creative, powerful tools.
Set in the Song Dynasty of Imperial China. **–MH**

Demon Dragonfly

The slave Mao Ping picked himself up and brushed the dirt from his elegant embroidered robe. His cowardly porter peeked from behind a vendor stall, stumbled to him, and bent down to reclaim the russet, cloth-wrapped package.

Happily, Mao Ping thought, the mysterious package didn't appear damaged. Its contents might be the open umbrella of a princess, but was heavier, as he had noticed earlier at the wood carver's shop.

Bellowing soldiers strutted up and down the stone-paved roadway and brandished their clubs.

Mao Ping took a last forlorn look at a squat, square building inside a bamboo barricade and pushed through the teeming, fearful crowds, his porter behind him lugging the precious parcel. Half an hour later, outside the gate to the garden courtyard of the Governor's residence, Mao Ping bobbed a disrespectfully shallow bow.

"Why are you so late?" the corpulent Head Butler said and smacked Mao Ping across his shaved head. "How did your robe become so filthy? It's torn. The Third Son will want an explanation."

Mao Ping, however, did not owe his fellow servant an explanation, and the Head Butler stomped off muttering, "Late on Master's birthday. You deserve your pigtail hacked off."

This would be insignificant compared to being eunuched not many years ago when Mao Ping's father, a farming peasant, received the honor of selling his son to the Governor's house. Mao Ping's thoughts flew to his little sister, nearly twelve years old and living at home. She wouldn't be so lucky. He worried his parents might sell her to a brothel during another lean time. But Mao Ping had always dreamed that someday she might marry his master.

"There you are!" roared the young Third Son from the archway leading to his wing of the house. He handed a sword

in its sheath to his combat trainer and ran to seize the package from the terrified porter. He suddenly turned sideways and looked Mao Ping up and down. “You’re late and you smell like a latrine,” but just as suddenly, he forgot his ire and said, “Follow me. You won’t believe what you’ll see.”

Mao Ping trotted after the Third Son through the familiar maze of corridors and rooms, passing the observatory and climbing a zigzag stairway onto the tiles of the house’s highest roof. The Third Son had moved fast, though it was certain he couldn’t see his feet through the package. Here was a cobbled-together platform, and on it stood a machine of a complexity Mao Ping had never seen before, the size of a weaned pig, with tarnished silver and coal-black parts.

The Third Son untied the package, setting aside the inner paper wrapper of maroon and gilt. What emerged appeared to be two carved waterwheels with strangely twisted paddles. The Third Son set the larger wheel flat upon the machine, pushed the much smaller wheel into the machine’s side on one end, tinkered with connectors, and then stood back trembling.

“Watch this,” he said. “It’s a marvel.” He took up a pearl-trimmed, lacquered box and pushed one of its protruding levers. The wheels began to spin. The machine’s noise grew louder, swishing like swords slashing the air. Mao Ping gaped as the machine rose up and hovered for a minute, then settled back upon its launching place.

“It’s better than a kite,” the Third Son said. “My Demon Dragonfly. Last year my father gave me a chest full of gold for my birthday, and I had her built. What do you think, Ping?” He stared at the slave and waited for an answer. “Oh, I forgot. I permit you to speak. What do you think of her?”

Barely able to breathe, Mao Ping lowered his gaze. “Is it magic?”

“I hardly know. Nature holds many secrets. I’ll ask Brother Chen, the monk who drew the plans. He says it’s a prototype. Here, you take a turn.”

For an hour and more, slave and master, being the same age and not quite adults, forgot their differences of class and authority as they snacked on slices of melon and practiced

maneuvering the Demon Dragonfly until the Head Butler heaved his frame up the stairway to announce, "Pardon me, but it's time to dress for your banquet, my lord."

"Next time we fly her," the Third Son whispered when the Butler had left, "the Demon Dragonfly will drop melons on those compost mounds near the river."

~

Late that evening, Mao Ping woke at a snort—his *own* snort. A ghostly face hovered outside his alcove within the Third Son's inner chambers. Then the face, his master's grinning countenance, floated forward into the alcove's lamplight. Mao Ping jumped up from his mat and stared at the floor midway between himself and his master.

"Overcome, I see. Tut, tut," the Third Son said. "Rising before sunrise, walking miles to the crafters, scuffling in the marketplace—no doubt, flying the Demon Dragonfly until you forgot about time, standing behind my chair during a seven-course feast, not eating and drinking until everything is cleared away…you have no excuse for napping, no excuse whatsoever! You should be beaten."

Mao Ping appreciated his master's harmless jokes.

"However, the fireworks are beginning. They're your punishment. Let's move to the balcony overlooking the city."

The two of them stood side by side during the dazzling display. Flames and blooming flowers, bright hailstones, thunder, flashes of lightning, arching fire rockets, more booming thunder, geysers, and sparkling fountains of lava. The Third Son seemed immersed in thought, and after the final devastating cataclysm that might have split the Earth in half, he turned away and said quietly, "Lovely… noisy… but unimaginative. Bring me tea."

When Mao Ping brought the pot and a fine porcelain bowl on a tray, the Third Son said, "Where's yours?"

Mao Ping hurried to his alcove and brought a bowl, a twin to the Third Son's.

"I'm waiting for my father's birthday present to me, and when it arrives, I'll dismiss you for the night. But, Father heard about your lateness today, and that I didn't discipline

you. He wants me strong. So, first tell me what happened?"

Mao Ping, like his master, was sitting cross-legged on a cushion with his tea bowl in his hand. He set the bowl on the floor and closed his eyes.

"You won't answer? Then, I command you. Tell me now! I order you, or else welcome your instant beheading."

Mao Ping rose to his knees and looked at his master's foot. "Please forgive me, sir," he murmured. "When I left the wood carver's shop and passed by a squat building where physicians cut boys with a knife, the monks were praying and burning incense. I stopped to watch. Some men stood on a cart nearby and began yelling about taxation. They raised a painted banner on a pole…"

"Keep talking," the Third Son said and sipped at his tea.

"A crowd gathered. Before long, soldiers arrived and ordered the people to leave, but the crowd threw stones at them. The soldiers then began beating everyone. I tried to run away, and someone pushed me to the ground. Forgive me, sir. That's why I was late."

"Yes," the Third Son said, considering, "A tax riot. They're all too common. Did you throw a stone? Did you?"

Mao Ping sighed.

"But not at the soldiers."

Mao Ping shuddered.

"You threw one at the squat building! You're pitiful… Praying monks must be peaceful, and we rulers? We should be effectual and pragmatic. Hmm… but you took advantage of the confusion for your private war—is this the place where they eunuched you?"

"Yes, sir. Or, a place like it. I can't really remember."

"Physicians don't take away life, and many boys die from castration. These surgeons are butchers—so, you're corrected. Don't call them physicians. And don't dare tell anyone what I said. I command you to be silent on this subject.

"Because I'm the Third Son and not the First, I'll never be governor of our province. But my father grooms me to command his army, and you and I are to travel next year to the eastern capital, where we'll study under Emperor Zhao's own

high general. We have many enemies all around." Here, his nostrils flared. "No one except you knows how I *hate* our policy of slavery."

The slave allowed his face to express wonder.

"And no one knows how I have studied the works of western philosophical men. Harmless fireworks, astral telescopes, and my quaint helio-copter, the Demon Dragonfly?"

Mao Ping nodded as if he comprehended, but he had never heard some of those words before, and even if he had—

"They aren't toys at all," the Third Son said.

Looking toward the Third Son's torso, Mao Ping asked, "What are they?"

"Conceal your intentions or you'll always be a slave."

At that moment there was a soft knocking followed by a chorus of giggles from the hallway. The Third Son leaped to his feet and swept open his door to reveal a slender young woman wearing a veil; she was flanked by two elderly, nodding court beauticians. "My birthday present!" the Third Son proclaimed as he drew the girl in by a hand. "You all can leave. What? Stop giggling, ladies, and go away."

A floral perfume was filling the air, and as Mao Ping passed the Third Son, the beaming young prince said, "The consummation of my marriage, a political affair, won't be for some years. My betrothed lives in another city and is too tame for my purpose in life. So… Plum Blossom here is my first concubine. I picked her myself, a virgin."

Mao Ping felt as if his life force had abruptly taken wing and flown away, leaving him a dry, shrunken husk. Then in an instant, when Mao Ping turned and looked the Third Son straight in the eye, eyes to eyes, the master stepped backwards and slumped, *his* joy extinguished, his whole body now reflecting the despair of the slave.

Mao Ping's feet rasped across the floor toward the exit.

"Oh…" the Third Son murmured, bowing to a slave for the first time ever. "I'm wrong for being insensitive to your loss of manhood. Please overlook my stupidity."

~

Months passed, and the Governor granted Mao Ping the annual fortnight to return to his home village for the slave's own birthday celebration, coinciding with the New Year, the Year of the Dragon. A true celebration it was, because Mao Ping, as a resident of the Governor's house, was a celebrity in this poor farming community. He brought presents for his relatives and their neighbors, who were shocked and amazed at the ingenious puzzles, puppets, strings of firecrackers, squibs, hoops, tops, and music boxes, as well as practical gifts like hoes for his father and older brother and cooking pots for his mother. All of it carried on a wagon pulled by a retired warhorse.

Mao Ping's chief delight at home was his little sister—perky and precocious for a female. She was a pleasure not only because she was his one sister, but because girls were rare in his life. He gave her a rich silk robe of vermilion and gold, and a carved wooden sword. The next day, wearing her new robe and twirling her sword, she danced around their winter-bare cherry trees until her mother told her to stop.

One night of Mao Ping's holiday, a storm ravaged the rural land, the kind of storm to uproot trees, scatter homes and hayricks, overrun stream-banks, and drown water buffalo. Mao Ping lay awake in his closet bedroom, listening to the roar, and watching the lightning's brilliance through gaps in the exterior boards. He thought of what the Third Son had said about slavery and unimaginative explosions and noise. Despite the sure havoc that the storm was inflicting upon the neighborhood, Mao Ping's parents' house remained dry and snug, and in his heart, he thanked his ancestors for their protection.

By dim early morning, the last squalls of the storm were still blustering in the distance, and while he lounged half asleep on his old comfortable bed, Ping's sister ran to him and whispered, "Come and see. In the barn. A secret."

"Was it damaged from the storm?"

"The barn is fine. Your old warhorse is happy because I fed him. Papa says the winter wheat is ruined, and Mama says I'll have to go away soon—to a marvelous house." Her face

was downcast.

Just what Mao Ping had always feared.

She led him by the hand, and inside the barn, three shadowy packages seemed to vibrate of their own accord. Mao Ping recognized one of them; it was exactly like what he had brought to the Governor's house on the Third Son's birthday. The second looked familiar, too. He unwrapped their rain-beaded tarpaulins just enough to confirm his guesses. The third and largest package was like a bin of melons, and from it he detected a sulfurous odor.

His sister said, wonderingly, "What are these? Machines for the gardens, for irrigation?"

"They aren't for farming," Mao Ping said. "They're surprise birthday presents for me."

"Who brought them?"

"The wild storm."

"No, that's not true." She smiled. "You're telling me a story. An enormous dragon flew them here late last night. With my own ears I heard his leathery wings beating the air."

"You're right," he said, forcing a blank countenance.

"Wouldn't it be exciting to ride a dragon someday? The big crate smells like a squib, a monster squib. Are these toys?"

"They're not toys. We have to hide our intentions, understand? Will you travel to the northern capital with me and my master?"

"Why?"

"To manage armies and conduct battles." Mao Ping stepped to the elderly warhorse, who was still munching his feed, and patted the beast's muscular shoulder.

"To fight?" Her eyes glowed and she smiled again, her teeth white and perfect. "Now I know. The packages contain weapons." She raised a finger to her lips with, "Shhh," then said, "Will you also find me a decent husband someday?"

"Of course I will," he said, thinking once again of the Third Son, who though engaged, might well be inspired to marry an adventuresome girl close at hand, a consort to be a partner in his crusade and who would give him courageous sons and daughters. "And let's quietly leave for my city

tonight with the horse and wagon and light some real fireworks. We must be effective and practical. I'll certainly need a helper."

His sister grunted as she tried to lift the crate.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you do."

Mao Ping turned away to hide his sudden tears.

After a few moments, he sniffed and wiped his eyes.

He hadn't actually thrown a rock at the squat, square building on the day of his master's birthday, but he had let the Third Son think so. And later that night, Mao Ping hadn't been nearly as upset at a reminder of his castration as he was disappointed because a concubine could distract his master from his sister. But all along, he felt certain the Third Son would give him the model Demon Dragonfly in pity when the full-scale Demon *Dragon's* stealthy construction was finally completed.

And now, with the smaller model, he could train his little sister to fly a formidable apparatus of warfare.

"Be sure to pack your wooden sword and new silk robe," he said. "For fun, let's find where the enormous dragon landed."

"Okay," she said eagerly. "We'll follow these skid marks. Maybe he's still here!"

Mao Ping allowed himself a smile. Tomorrow, he would finally obliterate the hated building where they stole his manhood, but far more importantly, his elaborate, preposterous, and covert matchmaking scheme just might be beginning in earnest.

Concealing one's intention to escape from slavery? Quite so. The Third Son had no idea that Mao Ping was an expert.

END

The ending of DD is understated, to be sure, but isn't that the point? To conceal? The next story is, well, the idea and outline of the story are fully developed, but the writing is still in process. It's the fifth story in the Jonathan T. Barron paranormal mystery series and promises to be my best story of all. See the extras for more details, though I don't want to give too much away! **–MH**

Extras

1. Homesick

This story originated as prompts in a creative writing class I took at the UNC-Asheville as an adult. The photo of a grandchild and friends was taken at Warren Wilson College.

2. Miss Thurman's Intervention

Our son Peter did yard work for a lady, who he told that he wouldn't help her anymore unless she allowed him to help her clean up her house, and so the story grew from this situation. I named Barry for Berry's Farm Supply in Swannanoa, one of my favorite places for hard-to-find items, though now it is long gone. The photo was taken inside a local Ingles supermarket store.

3. I'm Not a Baby Anymore

My former neighbor walked his sausage-like, not very bright, British Bulldog up and down our road, a scene that inspired this story. The photo is of the elderly bulldog of other past neighbors.

Native bee on ginseng flower somewhere in Western North Carolina

4. The Cruller Twist

One of my sons developed Type One diabetes during his senior year in college. The story began when he baked his mother a cake for her birthday, and he commented on not having tasted it as he cooked. The story, like an éclair is filled. Stuffed with symbolism. The photo was taken at a street corner near the Grove Arcade in Asheville, North Carolina.

5. Just Cold

The story was based on the real life and death of Jeffrey Reynolds, who died behind a vacant building in Asheville in November 2012 at age 23. This is the Happy Ending version. The ceramic sparrows belonged to my grandmother. She was a ceramicist but probably bought these. The sparrows are red and I like to put them out at Christmas.

6. Deprescience

This story emerged as a response to how sometimes I miss my now grown-up children when they were little. I began thinking how all loss and pain is a full, rich future in this life or another. The title is combination of Depression and Prescience, the latter meaning "pre-knowing."

7. Spark

This story grew out of two experiences, one camping at Acadia National Park in Maine. Somewhere about then I was thinking about how people go to the beach to stare at the ocean, into relative blankness, and how this activity helps a person connect to the immensity of the universe. But then I thought, *what if the coastline was instead the* edge *of the whole universe?* Wouldn't tourists want to go there, if it were possible? The other experience was of when one of my boys and a friend took our canoe out into the ocean for a lark, capsized, and towed it back full of water while swimming.

Note the Higgs-Boson (God particle) joke, and the brevity of the story itself that represents the tiny spark of the universe. And the reality that reality is bigger than the universe.

The photo is of a camper supply store in Acadia.

Native bee on Goldenrod along the Blue Ridge Parkway

8. Genius

The story is a veiled metaphor for my professional life, which seemed at times to offer nothing but "frustration and futility." The photo is of a restored classic car that belonged to the man who printed my newsletters for years.

9. Denying the Signs

We often visited the Outer Banks in the early spring. The lighthouse in the photo is the Wood End Light Lookout Station in Massachusetts.

10. Leaving Roanoke Island

The photo is a shot of my television playing Harold's favorite movie, "The Asphalt Jungle" (1950). There is a fourth finished (yet unpublished) Harold Stumbo story, but its content is a little rougher than is suitable for this book. Its title is "Thoroughbreds" and it's about race horses, illegal gambling, and fighting roosters.

11. Not the Wrong Planet

The story pretty much explains itself. I've intended the character to be on the Autistic Spectrum, which is how his brain can adapt to a world whose physics runs backwards. I wrote an extended first-person version of the same story. Titled "Ships Passing in the Night: Romance and Marriage between Lovers from Anti-synchronous Worlds," it appears in this volume. For a complete discussion on all aspects of this story, see the extra notes in the published collection *When Earth Whispers and Other Mostly Speculative Stories*, where Wrong Planet also appears, as well as all the stories in this present collection and several more appear.

The weird photo is artwork from the cover of a now-defunct magazine that published this story.

The woman holding a baby in the photograph is one of my great-grandmothers. The baby is a grand uncle.

12. Ships Passing in the Night: Romance and Marriage between Lovers from Anti-synchronous Worlds.

The *Mad Scientist Journal* published this first-person extension of "Not the Wrong Planet" in its Autumn 2016 hard-copy book, which can be purchased at Amazon.com. "Ahtebazille" is an approximation of what the name "Elizabeth" would sound like in a recording played backwards. I've linked this story to another story of mine, "The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity", by incorporating some of the latter's characters and events.

The photo at the end is of a grandchild on his birthday.

13. The Gingerbread Puppet Boy

I wrote this story some 46 years ago in a creative writing class at Berea College when I was a student there. Each of us was asked to write three sentences to begin the best short story ever, and then we traded our beginnings. I read my story aloud in class and the students applauded at the end. The photo is of Christmas tree decorations against our woodpile.

14. Skirmishing for Food

I was watching lines of black ants at the kitchen sink one day. The ants in the photo are lapping up spilled honey at our table. We were beekeepers back when I wrote this story. I've also written a pictorial guidebook on monarch butterflies.

15. Arrangements

The photo is of columbine flowers in the Denver Botanical Gardens in Colorado.

16. Demon Dragonfly

DD takes place during the early Song Dynasty of Imperial China (960-1279). Photo is of a plastic thing I found. The background is Heavenly Bamboo in front of our house.

Monarch butterflies on goldenrod along the Blue Ridge Parkway

Books by Mickey Hunt

When Earth Whispers & Other Mostly Speculative Tales (2016)

Clouds Fall to Earth
Black & White, Color, and Hardcover Editions
Novel (2025)

The Lone Journey Together:
Imaginative Stories of Beauty and Warm Humor
Fiction (2025)

Strange Days Radio (2025)*

The Acme of Egg Evolution (2025)*

Through the Eidetic Plane (2026)*

***Selected Cases of Paranormal Investigator Jonathan Barron**

Available on Amazon Books

Why I made this book

Often when I go out and about, I notice people and wonder about their lives. So many people seem sad and alone. They struggle every day with one affliction or another. I want to reach out to them in kindness, to give them something, but most of the time, I don't know what it can be. They might think I'm being intrusive.

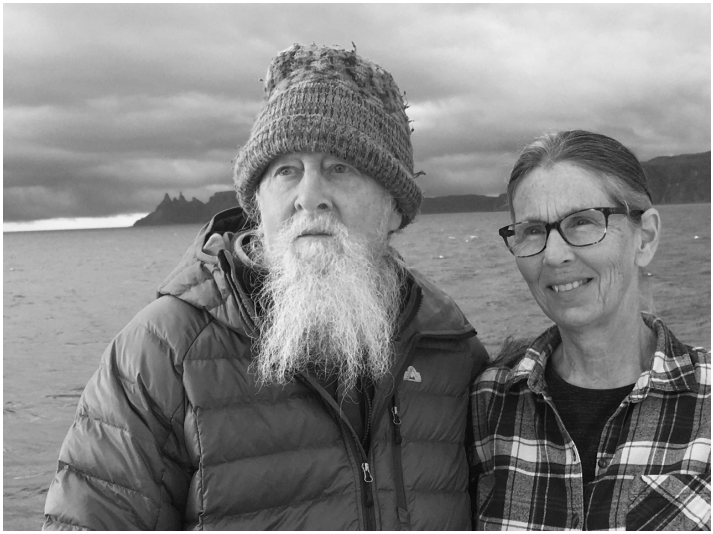
So, what can I give them? It has to be unique and personal, perhaps. Not money, because that would be trivial and even offensive, and I don't have much to spare. But I do have stories. This book is a selection of stories I have written and published elsewhere that I hope adds a tiny bit of joy or richness to someone's life. As I describe them, they are of warmth and good humor. They are fiction, and some fantastical, but they are real.

The title, *The Lone Journey Together*, is about how each of us is more or less alone in ourselves. True, we have others around us, but we are separate beings. When we pass away, especially, we embark upon that part of the journey ourselves. At the same time, everyone else is on the same journey, and we are together, and this is what we all have in common. The stories are intended to explore the hearts of others as they search for meaning.

I've dedicated it "To the Stranger."

-Mickey

The author and a friend, Celilo Falls on the Columbia River, 1957
Photo taken by the author's grandparent



The author and his wife in the Aleutian Islands, Summer 2024
Photo taken by an employee of the AK Marine Highway